A Small Silver Lining:

Adapting Support for the Pandemic

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Introduction

In this article, we discuss a writing support strategy called Writing Office Hours (WOHs), which has been one of the offerings provided by the Robert Gillespie Academic Skills Centre (RGASC) at the University of Toronto Mississauga since the beginning of the COVID 19 pandemic in March 2020. These WOHs evolved out of an earlier approach to course support known as Dedicated Drop-ins (DDIs); when DDIs were made impossible due to the pandemic, we developed the WOH approach. In this article, which is adapted from our presentation at the 2022 CWCA/ACCR's annual conference, we argue that these WOHs have had enthusiastic uptake by students (at least in part) because they help to break down some of the barriers—physical, logistical, psychological, and/or cultural—that can dissuade students from seeking out writing support. It is widely recognized that students do not always see writing centres as safe and welcoming spaces (e.g., Bond, 2019; Denny, 2010; Grutsch McKinney, 2013; Pregent, Williams, Marcyk, & Haywood, 2021). As we discuss below, because WOHs take writing support out of the centre and into students' course shells, through its learning management system (LMS) (e.g., Brightspace), they help us reach students who might not see (or might not yet see) the writing centre as the "cozy" (Grutsch McKinney, 2013) place that we as writing centre faculty would like it to be.

Program Description

In an earlier article, Kaler (2020) discussed the benefits and effects of setting up Dedicated Drop-Ins (DDIs) at our home institution. DDIs were sessions set up and announced through the LMS for each course between two days and a week before the due date for significant writing assignments in given courses. These sessions consisted of 2 to 4-hour blocks, with each block broken into numerous short (10-20 minute) appointments with students and were focused solely on a specified upcoming assignment. Prior to the sessions, the writing specialist offering the DDI would liaise with the course instructor to ensure that they thoroughly understood the assignment and whatever particular concerns the instructor might have. Following the sessions, the writing specialist would again reach out to the instructor to let them know the range of issues that were seen (following the RGASC's policies, instructors were not told anything that could identify students). As the article noted, DDIs were seen to be beneficial because: they supported students through assignment-specific, just-in-time feedback; they raised awareness of the writing centre; they were popular among instructors; and, because the writing specialist was familiar with the assignments, the appointments were targeted and streamlined (meaning we didn't need to spend much time reading and discussing the assignment's instructions at each meeting).

The authors of this article are the current writing specialists at the RGASC. When the pandemic hit, we knew we had to make some changes to our practice since students could no longer "drop in" to the centre for support. Although these changes were made out of sudden and shocking necessity, we wanted to retain the DDIs as far as possible, since they have been so widely embraced by students. In order to adjust, we first changed the name of the service, from DDIs to Writing Office Hours (WOHs), and also adapted its delivery. We still set up dedicated times that correspond to assignment timelines, and we still post announcements for each class through the LMS—but now we create appointment groups through each course's online shell, where students sign up for 20-minute appointments, meaning that we are even more integrated into each course than previously. In addition, instead of setting up a time where students come to the RGASC, we bring the RGASC's support to the course: students sign up for asynchronous appointment slots and email their work and their questions to the writing specialist running the WOH, whose institutional email is posted in the appointment, prior to the beginning of the appointment.

Establishing a new approach: Writing Office Hours (WOH)

In the fall term of 2021, which was the focus of our CWCA/ACCR presentation, we held 525 WOH appointments for 34 courses. By comparison, this is more than the number of DDI appointments that we carried out in the entire 2019-20 school year. Both DDIs and WOHs supported students across the disciplinary spectrum—from Biology to English—and across the years of study, from first-year to graduate-level courses; however, students made more use of WOHs than they did of DDIs. In fact, in fall 2021, the WOH appointments held by the two writing specialists accounted for 40% of all student appointments at the entire RGASC. WOHs were economical for the RGASC as well: they were relatively easy to set up and administer, and they could be booked and organized by the writing specialists themselves without the need for administrative or logistical support from the staff at the RGASC, en-abling the RGASC to expand its student support in other areas. Of course, the writing specialists must establish collaborative relationships with faculty across campus, which can be complex and which adds to the writing specialists' workload. However, such creative partnerships are an important part of any

writing centre (Hallman Martini, 2022), as well as for the writing specialists' integration into the institution: this added time represents a valuable investment on their parts.

Of the 525 appointments, 294 were unique students—thus, just under half the students booked more than one WOH appointment with us. What is even more exciting to us is that of the 294 unique users, 247 of them did not make use of other services at the RGASC. Thus, the WOHs enabled us to assist many more students than would have been helped otherwise. They both brought almost 250 students into the Centre's orbit, and freed up other resources, so that even more students could be helped with traditional appointments.

The sheer convenience of the WOHs for students surely contributes to their effectiveness. Since they are asynchronous and online, students do not have to go to the Centre or send in their work at a specified time. Instead, they email a draft with their questions and concerns at any point before the appointment time. Not surprisingly, students like this! Their feedback is overwhelmingly positive: many note that the feedback has been effective or helpful. Sometimes, as well, students ask for further feedback after the appointments, which gives an opportunity to introduce them to the Writing Centre's resources where they can book traditional appointments.

Beyond their convenience, however, we also think the WOHs are so successful because they bring the RGASC into the students' course: the WOHs are booked through the course calendar; promoted through course announcements by us, as well as by instructors and TAs; and are built on our intimate familiarity with course-specific expectations and issues. In short, we are creating ties and bringing aspects of the campus writing environment closer together by leaving our writing centre space and entering (virtually) the space occupied by students and instructors.

This leads us to another, and very important, consideration—one that we did not fully appreciate until we had started offering and reflecting on the WOHs. Salem (2016) notes that "it is a peculiar feature of writing center research that there has been no meaningful investigation of the decision not to come to the writing center." She points out,

> the choice to visit the writing center⋯ is rooted in deeper social factors such that not everyone is equally likely to 'want'
> to visit the writing center. In fact, the data show that some students arrive at the university primed by a complicated
> interaction between academic standing and identity to seek tutoring help. The choice to use the writing center is raced,
> classed, gendered and shaped by linguistic hierarchies. (pp. 14-15; See also Colton, 2020)

As WOHs oblige us to venture out of the cozy—sometimes too cozy (Grutsch McKinney, 2013)—seclusion of our writing centre, they help us to open it up for students who may not otherwise visit the RGASC, eliminating several of the barriers to accessing it, as compared with DDIs and regular appointments.

Reducing barriers

WOHs can help to reduce some of the barriers students face when it comes to traditional writing centre appointments as well as to the DDIs. Some of these barriers are physical or logistical: for instance, students may have to get across our large campus to the Centre. Once there, they need to wait for their appointment. Both of these factors increase the time commitment required for an appointment, as well as the potential challenges related to mobility and/or accessibility (Daniels & Babcock, 2015).

Other barriers the WOHs may help to address are psychological or cultural: writing centres can be intimidating places for some students, particularly first-generation students and/or students who haven't worked with writing centres before, and who might have the impression that they are about evaluation rather than support. Many students are also uncertain of their welcome (Bond, 2019; Denny, 2010; Pregent, et al., 2021) and might be doubtful as to whether the centre is really "culturally safe" (Harvey and Russell, 2022) for them. Even if we adopt the approach of being "critical friends" (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Karlse, 2019) in our work, it is easy to see how "critical" might be more significant for new students than "friend." From a first-generation student's perspective, Bond (2019) writes,

> while I generally saw the center at my undergraduate institution as a good thing, I also avoided it out of fear that I might not be welcome or that my professors might see me as an outsider unable to meet their expectations without supplemental instruction. (p. 163)

By contrast, as Bell, Brantwood, and Van Vleet (2022) note, there are real advantages to online, asynchronous work:

> Previous scholarship identifies ways in which online tutoring serves writers with a broad range of learning needs and preferences. In particular, asynchronous online tutoring may be especially important for learners with demanding or non-traditional schedules⋯ [and] benefits writers with disabilities, multi-lingual writers, and writers of color as it accommodates writers' social preferences and mental health. (p. 4)

Thus, the WOHs can help to eliminate or significantly reduce some of the main barriers to help-seeking —which could explain why we are seeing so many students getting help who would not otherwise come to our writing centre.

Another barrier to traditional writing centre appointments is that they can feel intimidating. At the RGASC, we try to be as open and welcoming as we can, and we do our best to make it clear to students how our support differs from the sort of evaluation that they expect from TAs and instructors, but there are limitations. Firstly, this is because we only get the opportunity to explain ourselves to students who show up: we never get a chance to talk to the ones who may be too intimidated to come. Secondly, despite our efforts to make our space warm and inviting, visiting us still involves coming to a separate office space, talking to a person at the front desk, and sitting in a waiting room. After waiting, students are brought to a room where they have to show their writing to an outsider who is presented as a writing expert, which can be particularly scary for students who feel insecure about their writing. Further, the writing expert might address issues that the student does not necessarily see as their top priority. In fact, Hedengren and Lockerd (2017) find that the two factors of administrative issues and students being doubtful of the productivity of sessions together account for much of the student reluctance to visit

writing centres. One of the current authors knows this reluctance firsthand from their own undergrad experiences with writing centres. Even more telling is that the other author was so convinced as an undergrad that writing centres were not for them that they never actually visited one.

In several ways, WOHs can provide a convenient and less-intimidating introduction to the services that a writing centre offers. For one thing, rather than students coming to the centre, the centre goes to them through their course LMS, which they can access in whatever setting makes them most comfortable. What is more, because of this online presence, students often see the writing centre as functioning as part of the course team—especially when the instructors and teaching assistants promote the centre's services. In fact, this perception is absolutely correct, as the setup of WOHs embeds us in the course: as well, writing specialists are often invited to give in-class announcements and workshops and/or presentations, which further solidifies the move away from the writing centre space and into the students' courses and spaces.

Conclusion

At RGASC, when we first started offering the WOHs we immediately saw that there was high demand for this sort of support. Now that we have had a chance to reflect on why this support is successful, we believe that a main factor is that they allow us to create a safe and accessible space for students to get support without requiring them to make what might be a daunting physical and emotional journey to the writing centre: instead, we come to the students in their LMS online course. At this stage, we have not interviewed or surveyed students to determine their motivations for making use of the WOHs. However, the fact that over one term we had 247 unique users for whom WOHs were their first (and potentially only) use of the writing centre's services is significant, especially when compared to roughly the same number for the whole year of DDIs in 2019-2020 (Kaler, 2020). WOHs are clearly successful—more so than the DDIs that preceded them—and we think that one of the main factors for this success is that they allow us to create a safer space for students to get support within their own courses and within their own comfort zones. And who knows? Nestled within this safer space might be a pathway leading them to full use of the RGASC's resources.

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