

Mapping the Landscape of Asynchronous and Synchronous Online Services in Communication Centers

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Centers

In our Communication Skill Center we are dedicated to adapting our services in order to best meet the needs of our clients. Considered a metropolitan university, the majority of our students are working professionals, parents, older students, and/or transfer students. Recently, in addition to our regular online course offerings which allow students to move between traditional face-to-face courses as well as online courses, our campus launched an online only degree track for students. Given the diverse nature of our clients as well as our growing online student population, we felt it was necessary to explore how our center could offer and support online mediated services.

For the past two years we have incrementally developed and piloted our asynchronous (submit and respond) and synchronous (real time video) online service offerings. It was through our experience of building online mediated services that we were motivated to learn more about what other centers around the country are doing to meet the needs of their clients. Consequently, through this study, we hoped to learn how our fellow centers are engaging in online mediated services. In this article, we first explore briefly the relevant literature. Second, we present the methodology for the study. Third, we report the results. Finally, we analyze the results in the discussion section.

Literature Review

Communication centers have served an invaluable role on our respective campuses as early as the 1940s (Sapolsky & Byrd, 1986). With the increase of online learning, it is understandable that communication centers must wrestle with how best, if at all, to accommodate these new types of student needs. In the following section, we first briefly review the evolution of online education. Second, we explore the existing literature related to the role communication centers currently play in the online landscape.

Online Education

Bower and Hardy (2004) as well as Lease and Brown (2009) beautifully chronicle the evolution of distance learning. Distance learning “has at its base the ability for students to receive instruction away from the traditional classroom” (Lease & Brown, 2009, p. 415). Beginning as early as 1728 with correspondence work via postal mail, distance learning became extremely popular toward the end of the 19th century (Bower & Hardy, 2004). Correspondence learning transitioned from the problematic mail system to the emerging technology of radio and telephone in the 1920’s and then television in the 1950’s (Lease & Brown, 2009) as various universities broadcast courses over channels. With the onset of two-way live transmissions in the 1980’s,

we began to see the availability of a synchronous form of distance education in video conferencing. In 1989 we were introduced to the personal computer (Lease & Brown, 2009), what we currently know as the World Wide Web (Perry & Pilati, 2011), and, consequently, what we conceptualize as online learning. Moore, Dickson-Deane, and Gaylen (2011) provide a synthesized understanding of online learning as “access to learning experiences via the use of some technology” (p. 130).

With the rise of the personal computer and World Wide Web, the field of higher education slowly began to adopt online learning in the 21st century, “In 2002, over 1.6 million postsecondary students were enrolled in online courses, and six years later, this number had almost tripled” (Perry & Pilati, 2011, p. 95). 2010 reported a 17 percent growth rate for online enrollment, which exceeded the 1.2 percent growth rate of the overall student population (Allen & Seaman, 2010). In 2014, 5.8 million students were enrolled in at least one online course (Friedman, 2016). In 2005, at our own institution, students were enrolled in 51,323 online semester credit hours (eLearning & Scholarly Technology and Resources, 2016). By 2015, that number grew to 74,851 (eLearning & Scholarly Technology and Resources, 2016). It is clear that online learning is entrenched in our post-secondary education system.

Online learning, as a type of “distance learning,” is not just relegated to students geographically distant from brick-and-mortar universities. Online learning also works to address a variety of student needs--convenience, time, and flexibility--often associated with balancing work and family (Hirschheim, 2005; Lease & Brown, 2009). If we consider the current demographic of today’s students, the majority have jobs or other responsibilities that keep them from attending a face-to-face class as well as

visiting our onsite communication centers. While many students and educators alike discuss what students might be missing as a result of these online classes, it appears that for some this may mean the difference between being able to obtain a degree or not (Krakovsky, 2010). It behooves us as learner-centered campus resources to explore the ways we could translate our center services into an online environment to better meet learners where they are at.

Role of Communication Centers

While communication centers can help students reduce speaking anxiety, experience better self confidence, and get one-on-one coaching for communication related skills, some universities have not adopted these centers due to lack of funds, lack of personnel, and lack of awareness on how to teach in a lab rather than a classroom (Morreale, 1998). Despite institutional challenges, the number of communication centers on college campuses is increasing. Currently, the National Association of Communication Centers directory lists 135 centers located across the nation, an increase of 80 centers since 2012 (Troillet & McIntyre, 2012).

The current communication center model for supporting learning is through onsite peer tutoring/coaching with students and providing additional resources for the subject matter as needed (Morreale, 1998; Schwartzman, 2013). LeFebvre, LeFebvre, and Anderson (2017) assert that public speaking is the primary service provided by communication centers followed by writing. Additionally, 42% of centers provide onsite services to online students but only 20% make e-tutoring available to clients (LeFebvre et al., 2017). Consequently, with the rise of more students participating in online classes, access to these traditional onsite services may be limited. However,

LeFebvre et al. (2017) assert, “centers are well positioned to provide services to distance and nontraditional students. The implementation of cutting-edge technology and digital services would allow communication centers to contribute to institutional goals and mission on a much broader canvas” (p. 7). The potential online reach of communication centers is an unexplored territory and requires more research to understand current service offerings as well as best practices.

Fortunately, our writing center counterparts as well as other disciplinary scholars have explored some of the advantages and disadvantages of asynchronous and synchronous online tutoring and peer coaching. In 1995, Harris and Pemberton explored the “new phenomenon” of online writing tutoring services and asserted,

Attempting only to replicate familiar face-to-face tutorial settings in an electronic, text-oriented environment can lead to frustration and to defeat as OWL [Online Writing Lab] planners find themselves unable to simulate all characteristics of effective tutorials. Instead, it is important to recognize that OWLs can have a number of very different configurations--configurations that take advantage of the strengths of online environments and that work with, not against, both local conditions and writing center theory. (p. 145)

Additionally, Harris and Pemberton (1995) found that while synchronous text-only chat tutoring can have the advantage of being immediate and more personal, some students found emailing and other asynchronous tutoring sufficient for their tutoring needs and preferable to visiting the writing center. Rilling (2005) found in researching an English as a Second Language (ESL) OWL

that asynchronous (email and email attachments) tutoring “limits the amount of interactivity possible...did not allow enough time for a back-and-forth communication with the tutor” (p. 370). Van Horne (2012) in his theoretical piece on using Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development to provide specific methods for synchronous text-only writing conferences asserted, “students can benefit from interactions where the tutor provides a structure for the conference” (p. 101). Kear, Chetwynd, Williams, and Donelan (2012) investigated math tutor perceptions of the use of an online multimodal web conferencing platform that included voice options. Tutors expressed that web conferencing was a more difficult medium for assessing students’ learning needs and that “audio was vital for creating a social atmosphere” (Kear et al., 2012, p. 959). The majority of students who participated in the math e-tutorials felt the web conferencing platform was “more convenient than face-to-face tutorials, almost as good, and would be a good supplement to face-to-face events” (Kear et al., 2012, p. 959). Finally, Ladyshevski and Pettapiece (2015) found in an exploration of virtual peer coaching in an online business course that students, though using technology regularly, were not necessarily savvy in the use of video conferencing tools. However, once the more media rich tools, such as Skype and Blackboard Collaborate, were used, students found less media rich conferencing tools, such as text only or audio only, to be frustrating in the virtual coaching experience.

While substantial research on e-tutoring and peer coaching has been conducted from the perspective of our writing center counterparts and other scholars, very little research has been done specifically on online communication center practices. Schwartzman (2013) explored how text-only synchronous chat influenced

communication center practices and found that the primary function of text-based chats was to schedule appointments followed by questions about the center's hours. Only 6.9 percent of chats were related to improving oral communication (Schwartzman, 2013, p. 658). However, Schwartzman did advocate that "communication centers should seriously consider how to offer services through a combination of various technologies" (p. 665). Unfortunately, in their 2014 publication, LeFebvre and LeFebvre found that only 18.2% of centers offered e-tutoring. In the 2017 follow up article, the percentage improved, but only slightly, with 20% of communication centers offering online services (LeFebvre et al., 2017).

With the rise of mediated communication technologies, the push toward online learning, and the changing, complicated landscape of the "traditional" college student, the time is here for communication centers to consider how to best adapt our services to effectively support the learning needs of our clients. Online mediated conferencing is one such modality that can meet the academic, personal, and geographical needs of our increasingly diverse client base (Chappell, Arnold, Nunnery, & Grant, 2015). Therefore, it is worthwhile to first explore how communication centers are engaging in online conferencing as a way to better understand how to best position ourselves to serve all of our clients in a way that is effective and relevant moving forward (Wood, 2015). To do so, we explored the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent are communication centers offering online mediated services?

RQ1a: For communication centers offering online mediated services, what kind of platforms are being used?

RQ1b: For communication centers offering online mediated services, what kind of services are offered?

Methodology

Using the National Association of Communication Center's directory, center websites were identified for inclusion in the project. Websites were chosen as an appropriate artifact as they represent the most likely point of contact between an online learner and her campus communication center. Of the 135 centers included in the directory, 115 (85%) included websites. Of those 115 websites, 6 (5%) links resulted in 404 dead link messages and 4 (3%) were not for an oral communication center (e.g. debate team, department page, writing center only), leaving 105 (91%) viable links. Of the viable links, 21 (20%) mentioned online services qualifying them for the study.

To better understand to what extent these 21 communication centers were offering online services, a basic quantitative content analysis of the website text was conducted. Kerlinger (as summarized by Prasad, 2008), asserts that content analysis is "a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables" (p.2). Specifically, the websites were analyzed quantitatively to see what types of online mediated services were offered--asynchronous (submit and respond) and/or synchronous (real time), the platforms used for services (e.g. Skype, WebX, virtual whiteboard), as well as the types of consulting services provided (e.g. outline feedback, presentation rehearsals, mock interviews).

We coded the data using emergent categories. We captured categories related to the types of online services, service

platforms, and consulting services after reviewing the websites. Once the coding categories were established, two coders coded all websites separately, coding for category presence or absence for each website. After coding the data separately the coders met to compare findings. Due to the amount of coding categories, percentage of agreement between raters was difficult to establish. However, six (29%) of the websites had 100% rater agreement. For the remaining 15 (71%) websites, the coders reviewed the website together using consensus to determine the presence or absence for the categories in question.

Results

Of the 21 communication center websites advertising online mediated services, only 23% offered both asynchronous and synchronous services (see Table 1). For centers offering one or the other type of mediated service, synchronous services (52%) were the most popular form offered.

Table 1: Types of Online Mediated Services

Category	N = 21	%
Synchronous (real time)	11	52%
Both (asynchronous and synchronous)	5	23%
Asynchronous (submit and respond)	4	19%

Mediated Platforms

All centers offering both asynchronous and synchronous mediated services, used email for asynchronous mediated services. With regard to synchronous mediated services the majority of the centers (80%) used some kind of

online, real-time conferencing platform such as Online Whiteboard, Zoom, or Google Hangout (see Table 2).

Table 2: Types of Online Platforms (Asynchronous and Synchronous)

Category	N = 5	%
Email (asynchronous)	5	100%
Virtual Room/Online Conferencing (e.g. university platform, Blackboard, Collaborate, Online Whiteboard, Zoom, WebEx, Google Hangout)	4	80%
YouTube/Vimeo (asynchronous client work submission)	2	40%
Digital Documents	1	20%
Skype	1	20%
Video feedback (asynchronous staff response)	1	20%

Centers offering only synchronous mediated services predominantly used an online, real-time conferencing platform (91%) followed by Skype (18%) (see Table 3). Centers offering only asynchronous mediated services used either email (50%) or some kind of institutional learning system platform for receiving messages (50%) (see Table 4).

Table 3: Types of Online Platforms (Synchronous Only)

Category	N = 11	%
Virtual Room/Online Conferencing (e.g. university platform, Blackboard, Collaborate, Online Whiteboard, Zoom, WebEx, Google Hangout)	10	91%
Skype	2	18%

Table 4: Types of Online Platforms (Asynchronous Only)

Category	N = 4	%
Email	2	50%
Institution Learning System (Blackboard or unnamed)	2	50%

Counting Services

With regard to types of consulting services offered, the majority of communication centers offering both asynchronous and synchronous consulting services advertised general rehearsal feedback (80%) (see Table 5). More specifically, these centers offered help with outlines/organizing (60%) as well as with visual aids (40%) (see Table 5).

The majority (73%) of centers offering only synchronous mediated services also advertised help related to general rehearsal feedback, followed by visual aids (64%), written documents (55%), and outlining/organizing (45%) (see Table 6). Three centers (75%) offering asynchronous mediated services each advertised different consulting services such as rehearsal feedback, brief feedback, and writing mechanics, while one center (25%) did not

indicate the services available, only that they were offered (see Table 7).

Table 5: Types of Consulting Services Offered (Asynchronous and Synchronous)

Category	N = 5	%
Rehearsal Feedback (generally stated; presentations, conference talks, panel presentations, etc.)	4	80%
Outlines/Organizing	3	60%
Visual Aids	2	40%
Delivery/Articulation	1	20%
Brainstorming	1	20%
Topic Selection	1	20%
All stages of speech creation (general statement, no specific services listed)	1	20%
Research	1	20%
Source citations (speech)	1	20%
Group projects/presentations	1	20%

The majority of communication centers offered synchronous only mediated services with an emphasis on rehearsal feedback. If we look at overall consulting services provided, regardless of asynchronous or synchronous forms, the majority of advertised services included rehearsal feedback (65%), visual aids (45%), and outlining/organizing (40%).

Table 6: Types of Consulting Services Offered (Synchronous Only)

Category	N = 11	%
Rehearsal Feedback (generally stated; presentations, conference talks, panel presentations, etc.)	8	73%
Visual Aids	7	64%
Written Document (essay, report, resume, cover letter, application, employment)	6	55%
Outlines/Organizing	5	45%
Audience Adaptation/Instructor Expectations	4	36%
Delivery/Articulation	4	36%
Multimedia (blogs, videos, digital narratives, online portfolios, etc.)	4	36%
Brainstorming	3	27%
Topic Selection	3	27%
All stages of speech creation (general statement, no specific services listed)	2	18%
Argument/Content Development	2	18%
Anxiety Management	2	18%
Mock Interview	2	18%
Research	2	18%
Source Citations (speech)	2	18%
Assignment	1	9%
Group Projects/presentations	1	9%
Record Speech	1	9%

Roughdraft	1	9%
Writing Mechanics (grammar, punctuation, in-text citations)	1	9%

Table 7: Types of Consulting Services Offered (Asynchronous Only)

Category	N = 4	%
Anxiety Management (Asynchronous Center 1)	1	25%
Delivery/Articulation (Asynchronous Center 1)	1	25%
Rehearsal Feedback (presentations, conference talks, panel presentations, etc.) (Asynchronous Center 1)	1	25%
Other (brief feedback) (Asynchronous Center 2)	1	25%
Writing Mechanics (grammar, punctuation, in-text citations) (Asynchronous Center 3)	1	25%
None Specified (Asynchronous Center 4)	1	25%

Discussion

In an effort to better understand how communication centers are addressing the varied needs of our increasingly diverse student base, our project set out to determine to what extent communication centers are offering online mediated services. It appears that a relatively small number of centers, 21 (20%), publicly advertise these types of services on their respective websites. Our finding is consistent with LeFebvre et al.'s

(2017) finding that 80% of centers did not offer e-tutoring. Given the prevalence of online learning in higher education as well as the transitioning nature of the traditional college student, it is surprising that so few centers are engaging in online services.

Of those centers advertising online services, only five (23%) offered the flexibility of both asynchronous and synchronous services. As more and more of our student stakeholders move away from the traditional, on-campus student, and find themselves juggling not just on-site and online course work, but also jobs and families, the flexibility and convenience of our center offerings becomes foundational to student success. As many synchronous services are dependent upon staffed center hours, the match with student availability may be difficult. To have so few centers publicize both forms of mediated online services suggests that many students may lack access to the learning support our centers can offer.

It is heartening, however, to find that those centers that offer both and only synchronous (real time) mediated services do so predominantly through virtual conferencing platforms. The use of these high-touch technologies that allow users to upload documents, use video chat, as well as instant messaging, works well to simulate the onsite conferencing experience with which most tutors and clients alike are familiar and find to be necessary for creating social presence (Kear et al., 2012; Ladyshewksy & Pettapiece, 2015; Rilling, 2005). Additionally, these types of services may help to build the relationships and sense of community that many online learners crave (Hirschheim, 2005; Krakovsky, 2010).

It is also unsurprising to learn that the most advertised synchronous services included rehearsal feedback, help with visual aids, and assistance with outlining/organizing content. These services

closely align with LeFebvre et al.'s (2017) frequency findings for most requested student services, which included outlining, delivery, organization of speech, and video reply or practice. To that end, it is clear that the centers offering synchronous mediated conferencing are working to provide services most requested by onsite center clients. Additionally, the percentage of centers (30%) offering synchronous services related to written documents, which included reports, papers, resumes, and applications, also aligns with LeFebvre et al.'s (2017) finding that writing was the second most requested communication center service.

Finally, it seems that those few centers offering asynchronous only mediated services, while clearly not as robust as the synchronous offerings, are meeting a need on their respective campuses. It is possible that due to staffing and available technology, as well as type of institution, that this form of mediated service is sufficient.

Implications and Recommendations

Our major implication found in the data, as well as the literature, is that while universities and colleges are progressively adapting distance learning to meet the needs of the new norm for college students, communication centers appear to be adapting more slowly. With a large number of students enrolled in online classes (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Friedman, 2016; Perry & Pilati, 2011) the percentage of centers advertising online services (20%) is not in congruence with the growing number of students seeking opportunities for online learning. It is important to try to understand why communication centers have or have not adopted online services.

In a small pilot survey of communication centers conducted summer

2017, we found 7 (64%) of the 11 centers offered online services. When asked about the benefits of doing so, the ability to serve students was the strongest response. One participant responded, "It meets the needs of students who are prevented from coming to the center." Others commented, "Fits student schedules, allows us to work with online students" and "connect with the hybrid and online students." Finally, yet another participant asserted, "Such appointments allow us to serve students who are studying abroad or conducting field work or research off campus. (Most of our requests for these appointments come from PhD students.)"

Technology seemed to be the key challenge centers identified in offering online services: "not being able to connect immediately with the client - tech difficulties" and "Only a problem if the technology isn't working." It is also important to note that one center, when prompted to identify ways they wanted to strengthen their offerings responded, "Nothing. We do not wish to increase the volume of these appointments nor to widely advertise them. Ours is a primarily residential institution, and we want to encourage students to use our F2F [face-to-face] appointments."

While the majority of participants in the pilot study offered online services, we found that 4 (36%) indicated that their respective centers did not offer online services. Reasons included, "it's not particularly appealing because of being a small liberal arts school where students live on campus; there are fewer time/access constraints than there were when I worked at a large state school," "We have not seriously explored this option," "While the university has a strong online presence, additional funding and support have not been explored at this time," and "no plans at present." Two centers indicated they were considering it,

with one stating, "We will be making a plan for this over the summer." It seems, for these four centers, that perception of student need as well as resources are the primary reasons for not offering the services.

We recognize that some of those students seeking online learning experiences are able to come to centers for services during their business hours; however, many of our students, even those considered to be more traditional, often have full time responsibilities that keep them from visiting our brick-and-mortar centers. Providing diverse offerings of services, both face-to-face as well as online, we argue is an ethical imperative for communication centers. Ensuring that all students, no matter what situation they are in, have an equal opportunity to access learning support is a responsibility we as communication centers, have the opportunity to embrace. We commend the centers we discovered going above and beyond to offer these variety of services to students; they are excellent examples for centers working to expand the landscape of their own center offerings.

Given our findings, we encourage more communication centers to seriously investigate the logistics of offering online services. We were surprised to find that only five centers advertised both asynchronous and synchronous services. However, given the challenges of trying to provide both types of mediated services with current staffing and center hours, it is understandable that so few centers are attempting to provide both and instead focus on the more media rich synchronous offerings. While offering online services may not be appropriate for all communication centers as indicated in the pilot data, communication centers, as not only service providers but also partners in learning, should work to meet the needs of all of our potential clients to the best of our abilities. Therefore, those centers currently

not offering online services should explore the need as well as the feasibility of providing these services. Taking a small step, such as offering video submissions for asynchronous feedback, could help increase access to the valuable resources our centers have to offer.

Our second implication is related to representation of online services. We suspect that the website information provided by other centers, much like our own, may not accurately reflect all of the services they provide. While our content analysis results are fairly robust, it is quite possible the other communication centers are providing many more services than are advertised on their respective websites. To that end, we assert that centers that advertise their online services should be explicit in describing the types of services and platforms. As coders, we approached the respective websites much like potential clients, looking for any information we could find related to online services. Some websites reduced uncertainty in admirable ways by delineating types of services concretely and providing clear instructions for scheduling and engaging in the asynchronous and/or synchronous platforms. Other sites were more difficult to navigate, where information about online services was buried in menu links or mentioned as side notes in dense paragraphs of text.

As center managers, we understand that the burying of online services might be a necessity, as staffing may not adequately support the advertised services or the center desires to keep clients focused on using the onsite resources, as mentioned in the pilot data. However, as potential clients, the inability to easily locate information about online services felt discouraging. Consequently, if a center is advertising online services, it is important to frame the website content as the first point of contact with a client. Many of us provide significant

staff training on greetings and relationship building in our onsite centers. The same care should be given to our center website “door.” In doing so, uncertainty reduction and rapport building should be at the forefront of content and content design.

Future Research. Understandably, this study provides the first step in mapping the landscape of communication centers’ online mediated services. Because this study was limited to website content, the landscape of communication center online services is undoubtedly more rich than we were able to capture in this project. Consequently, it could prove useful to build on our pilot project and talk directly with communication centers about their online services. To strengthen our understanding of centers offering online services, it is also valuable to explore how centers are preparing staff to provide online services. Talking with center directors about their staff training and training resources related to both asynchronous and synchronous online services could provide best practices for centers engaging in and considering these types of services. Finally, we also believe it would be fruitful to better understand why centers might not offer online services in order to identify the challenges preventing online services and/or reasoning for providing only onsite services.

Conclusion

The extent to which communication centers are providing online mediated services is fairly minimal, with only 20% of centers advertising such services on their respective websites. Of those advertising online services, the majority are offering only synchronous (real time) services, which include primarily rehearsal feedback as well as help with visual aids, written documents

(other than outlines), and outlining/organizing content.

We approached this project hoping to better understand the landscape of communication center online services. We found that few centers offer both asynchronous and synchronous online services; but that centers were very similar in the services they offered. It is our hope that through this study we have both helped to map the landscape of communication center online mediated services as well as inspire our fellow centers to think critically about how best to support their respective campuses. With so many of our campuses moving toward or already fully engaged in online learning as well as the diverse needs of our dynamic student populations, communication centers are uniquely positioned to ensure that our nontraditional/online students' learning needs are respected just as much as our traditional face-to-face students by providing comparable, accessible online services. Our findings have affirmed our own passion for navigating this new landscape and we look forward to taking what we have learned to better serve all of our clients.

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