

Dialoguing at a distance: How do we communicate with external students?

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For many, the ideal model for academic skills advising is a dialogical one. The learning adviser, working one-on-one with the student, engages them in a critical conversation about their work, helping them to discover what they are trying to do and develop the skills they need to do it. But how does this model work when the adviser is not in the same room as the student? The number of students who do not physically attend a university campus is growing steadily, and these students – often known as distance, external or flexible – have the same need for support, guidance and academic initiation as their on-campus counterparts. At one regional campus of Central Queensland University, 45% of the students who use the learning support centre are distance students. They submit drafts of their assignments to a learning adviser online, who reads and comments on the work and returns it to the student by email. This paper uses three case studies to explore the strengths, weaknesses and possibilities of communicating with students at a distance through email. It concludes that it is possible to engage in a modified form of dialogue with external students from which both the adviser and the student can benefit. But it also argues that other well-established models from the face-to-face environment can be equally effective online.

Key Words: online tutoring, dialogical learning, distance education.

1. Introduction

How do we communicate with students who are physically remote from a university campus? For academic learning advisers working in the area of academic writing, the answer to that question is overwhelmingly: online. Using the Internet, we aim to offer distance students the same service we offer our face-to-face students: one-on-one input, feedback, and collaboration. But to what extent can the models we use with our internal students be simply carried over to the online environment? At the Communications Learning Centre (CLC) at the Rockhampton campus of Central Queensland University (CQU), academic learning advisers take phone calls and brief email queries from distance students, but our main way of communicating with them is through their texts. They submit draft assignments online, and we respond via email. Inevitably, we draw on the models we use in our face-to-face work to provide a framework for our online sessions, but the fit is often an awkward one. In face-to-face conferences, the ideal model is usually considered to be dialogical. Through discussion, we seek to work with students in a collaborative way that will empower them to develop their writing skills. In the online environment, however, the possibilities for dialogue tend to be more limited, particularly when the medium of communication is asynchronous. The learning adviser faces the risk – or perhaps the temptation – of falling into a more prescriptive approach when working online, without the stimulus of the immediate interpersonal interaction that occurs when student and adviser are sitting side by side.

In the face-to-face environment, the adviser tends to think s/he has failed if s/he doesn't adhere to the dialogical model. Yet this model is not always the most appropriate one for meeting the needs of the student. In some cases, what the student needs above all is to be introduced to the mysteries of academic genres and conventions, and in these situations, the learning adviser may well take a more prescriptive approach based on information sharing and instruction. This situation occurs just as often online. When working face-to-face, however, even a prescriptive session can appear to be dialogical because of the incidental interaction – social and collegial – that tends to occur when two people work together. In the online environment, where there is no immediate interaction, the essentially prescriptive nature of the session can become disconcertingly apparent.

This paper seeks to explore some of the different types of asynchronous, online interactions an adviser may experience. It begins with an examination of the dialogical ideal as it was developed in the context of face-to-face advising, identifying its strengths and weaknesses as a way of pinpointing situations in which this model should be adapted as far as possible to the online environment and those in which alternative models might be better. It then moves on to an examination of three case studies based on actual scenarios experienced at CQU. It will argue that despite technological constraints, it is possible to use a modified form of dialogue online, and that, just as in face-to-face advising, this model has some significant strengths, particularly where global writing issues are dominant for the student. Nevertheless, there are also situations where, again as in face-to-face advising, a more prescriptive model is appropriate. This model, too, can be particularly effective in the online environment.

2. The dialogical ideal

The dialogical model has been dominant in university writing centres in the US since the early 1980s, when it was championed by such influential practitioners as Stephen North (1982, 1984) and Muriel Harris (1983). The teaching model put forward by North and others involves drawing the student writer into conversation about their writing, focusing on the student's own writing processes. The intention is to use the student's existing knowledge and experience as a platform for further reflection, learning and development. Through talk, the student is able to develop her ideas, reflect on her writing strategies, and begin the process of self-critique that will lead to fruitful revision and rewriting, and ultimately the achievement of her own writing goals.

This model involves a significant shift from older styles of teaching writing that focused on technical skills such as grammar and sentence construction. Rather than focusing on the individual texts brought to them by writers, tutors focus on the writers themselves, ensuring "that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction" (North, 1984, p. 438). Individual consultations with students are an important part of the work of most Australian academic language and learning (ALL) advisers, and the dominant pedagogical model for these is a dialogical one similar to that used in the US. This is implicit in a statement on the website of the Language and Academic Skills in Higher Education Conference 2005 (cited in Chanock, 2005, p. 17) that specifies that the role of ALL advisers is "developmental, not remedial. We don't 'fix' problems – rather, we teach students the strategies and skills with which they can achieve the outcomes to which they aspire". A similar statement can be found on the websites of a number of academic skills centres, which take care to let students know that they should not expect the centres to provide an editing or proof-reading service (see, e.g., Flinders University and Griffith University).

Two papers by Kate Chanock (2000, 2007), which reflect on her own practice as an ALL adviser, provide compelling instances of the dialogical model at work in the Australian context. Both papers explore the complex dynamic of a one-on-one tutorial session that functions as an exploratory, reflective, open-ended conversation in which the specific needs of individual students are identified collaboratively, and solutions developed in the same way. Chanock's practice as described in these papers exemplifies North's (1982, p. 435) description of two key elements of the dialogical model: finding out where the student is and beginning from there, and

leading the student to reflect on their own writing processes. Like North, however, Chanock is writing of the kind of advising session in which the ALL adviser and the student are both present in the same place at the same time, making literal dialogue possible. The question of how well the key elements of such sessions transfer to the online medium using asynchronous technology is still an open one.

2.1. Supporters and detractors

Proponents of the dialogical model from both sides of the Pacific assert that it has many benefits for students and writing tutors/advisers alike. Unfortunately, much of the evidence for its effectiveness is anecdotal. As Jones (2001, p. 5) notes, it is notoriously difficult to assess writing performance and the serious researcher in this area is deterred by a “set of seemingly intractable methodological problems”. Nevertheless, the discussion-based approach to supporting student writers is believed to have many advantages over older methodologies focusing on error correction. For instance, Thompson (1999, p. 2) writes that it is empowering for students, helping them to “become more active learners and more independent writers”. She describes the use of the Socratic method in a writing centre, which she defines as “a process of posing probing questions aimed at helping students find a meaning they wish to express or the language with which to express it. Each answer to a question provides the starting point for another question, which leads to another answer, and so on” (p. 3). Through this process, she argues, students are able to develop the metacognitive skills that will help them to become better writers.

Harris (1995), too, identifies a number of benefits of the discussion model. For her, the non-hierarchical relationship between student and writing tutor represents a unique teaching and learning scenario that enables students to “gain knowledge about their writing and about themselves that are not possible in other institutionalized settings” (p. 27). Because the writing tutor is not responsible for either grading the students’ work or judging their performance, students feel they can speak freely, and the result is “exploratory talk” that is very productive (p. 31). To identify the features students themselves most valued in their sessions, Harris conducted an analysis of student evaluations. She found that the benefits students identified could be grouped into four categories: “encouraging independence in collaborative talk” (p. 30); “assisting with acquisition of strategic knowledge (skills)” (p. 32); “assisting with affective concerns (confidence, anxiety)” (p. 34); and “interpreting the meaning of academic language” (p. 36).

For tutors/advisers, there are obvious advantages in the use of a model that removes any pressure on them to be rule-makers and law-givers, and gives them a clear alternative to the role of “grammar mechanic” or “fixer”. It is consistent with social constructivist learning theory, in which many educators have been trained, and it is ethically acceptable, as it removes the possibility that the tutor/adviser is having an undue degree of input into the students’ work. What’s more, it can be very satisfying. There is excitement, pleasure and challenge in “collaborating” with students (see, for instance, Boczkowski’s (2006) anecdote about the tutor who sings). One writing teacher even speaks of one-on-one writing conferences as satisfying a “desire for intimacy, for meaningful connection with student writers” (Lerner, 2005, p. 187).

Nevertheless, the model has its sceptics and dissenters. One area of contention is the question of identifying technical errors in a student’s writing. The student-centred view of writing pedagogy holds that there is little or no value in correcting technical errors in a student’s text. According to North (1982), the writing tutor should always begin with the text as a whole, and with the writer’s intentions and ideas. He asserts that “comma splices and dangling modifiers can be put off a long time for the writer who wants to know if you understand what she means” (p. 439). Technical errors, he suggests, will resolve themselves through the re-writing process as the writer draws closer to saying what she means. But those who work with ESL students have found this approach less than efficacious. Cogie, Strain, and Lorinskas (1999, p. 7), for example, speak of “the inadequacy of nondirective tutoring for meeting the needs of non-native

writers". They identify a range of error-detection techniques that they believe are more effective with some ESL students than discussion of process and ideas.

Rilling (2005) also raises the question of those ESL students who present with no global-level problems but a range of sentence-level errors. She points out that the literature is divided on the value of the error correction process. Some theorists believe that "error correction could be harmful to developing writers", while others believe that "feedback on form has a strong role to play in writing pedagogy" (p. 362). Like Cogie et al. (1999), Rilling has developed a range of strategies for identifying technical errors in the work of ESL students that she believes function as "feedback on writing that assists second language writers in moving to the next phase of their interlanguage development" (p. 363). These strategies include identifying a selection of errors and modelling correction of them, leaving the student to identify and correct other instances of the same errors. Rilling does not touch on whether this practice might be helpful with non-ESL students, but there is some evidence to suggest that even with native speakers, the modelling of error identification and correction does improve students' capacity to identify and correct errors (Carifio, Jackson, & Dagostino, 2001).

Other critiques of the dialogical model are more political. Boczkowski (2006), for instance, suggests that the non-directive focus of this form of tutoring – which he calls "minimalist" – can serve as a barrier between the student and what they need to know to succeed as a writer in the university environment. In other words, tutors may withhold information that student writers need because they are committed to not directing or instructing the student in any overt way. The effect may be to exclude the student from the academic community he or she is trying to join: "Minimalist methodology does little to alert the non-initiate to the codes of the university; it does not demystify the conventions of academic writing. In fact, this hands-off approach might help maintain the status quo of insiders and non-initiates" (p. 7). This critique suggests that a focus on the student's own writing processes needs to be supplemented by a recognition that some elements of academic writing are independent of the student's self-development. This has particular relevance in Australia, where ALL advisers see their "primary role" as assisting "students to understand the cultures, purposes and conventions of different academic genres and practices" (LAS Conference 2005 website, cited in Chanock, 2005, p. 17).

Another potential problem with the dialogical method is the sheer difficulty of implementing the model at all times and in all situations, especially given practical constraints such as the limited time available for each student, the pressures of imminent assignment deadlines, and the great diversity of issues students bring to writing centres. Anecdotal evidence from the literature suggests that every writing tutor struggles at times to resist a student's desire that the tutor simply show them how to "fix" an assignment that has to be submitted within hours (see, e.g., Gaskins, 2006; Cogie, Strain, & Lorinskas, 1999). Reflecting on his own practice as a writing centre director, Gaskins (2006, p. 13) identified ways in which North's ideal was not always realistic "under the real-world conditions of our particular situation". An informal study of tutor practice in his writing centre showed that tutors were spending about 40% of their time on the global writing issues championed by North, and the rest of their time on "sentence-level matters", "correctness", "documentation" (i.e. referencing) and "assignment direction" (p. 13). Gaskins' response to these figures is relief that "we do manage to conduct *some* conferences that approach what we consider to be the ideal" (p. 15).

3. Taking the one-on-one consultation online

The increasing use of the Internet for one-on-one tutoring has been seen by some as a threat to the dialogical model. As Jackson (2000, p. 1 of 8) writes, "The most frightening prospect of the online tutorial is that all one is left with is the writing and not the writer, the product and not the process". In theory, at least, online tutoring seems to reverse the traditional, highly prized shift of focus in writing pedagogy celebrated by North. Gaskins (2006, p. 13) makes a similar point in discussing the introduction of online tutoring into the writing centre he directed: "Pedagogy aside, simply allowing students to send drafts for our response online seemed tantamount to

allowing them to drop off their drafts and pick them up later, which is something we'd never allowed students to do".

According to a survey of writing centre websites in the US, most writing centres assume that the one-on-one online tutorial will comprise "a single exchange, not an extended relationship" (Anderson, 2002, p. 78). In other words, students submit a draft assignment and a tutor reads it, writes some comments, and returns it to the student. There is only one "round of turn-taking", as Anderson puts it (p. 78), rather than the multiple rounds one would expect in a face-to-face tutorial. As a result, the kind of Socratic exchange envisioned by Thompson (1999) is impossible. In Golden's (2005, p. 23) words, "The dynamics of an asynchronous online tutoring session do not allow the immediate two-way conversation so important to face-to-face sessions".

Nevertheless, there are those who suggest that it is possible to use the principles of the dialogical model of non-directive questioning as the basis of new pedagogies evolved specifically for the online medium. As Anderson (2002, p. 72) puts it, online tutorials "are practices that invite – perhaps even *require* – new literate behaviors, behaviors that, in turn, invoke correspondingly new conceptions of literacy in the writing center". Similarly, Jackson (2000) holds that it is possible to honour the principles of student-centred and process-oriented methodologies while developing new ways of operating online: "virtually everything one is taught about effective f2f [sic] peer tutoring lies at the core of successful online interaction between tutor and writer: make sure the writer takes ownership of his or her own work, always ask questions, and allow the writer to make the necessary connections" (p. 2 of 8). For Jackson, the lack of overt interaction between the student and the tutor in an online tutorial may actually facilitate a self-reflexive intrapersonal interaction: "the writer facing herself through her own writing" (p. 2 of 8). Jackson hypothesises that the "present absence" of the writing tutor in the online medium may enable the writer to begin the process of self-critique. As such it is "very much an advantage to the writer, as the online medium establishes the necessity for writer-centred responsibility, a responsibility that must be delicately fostered by the online tutor" (p. 3 of 8).

It may also be possible to relate this somewhat ghostly role of the writing tutor to the inner dialogue that takes place in every writer. As Chanock (2000, p. 61) argues (drawing on Bruffee), all writing is "consciously addressed to somebody, even if the writer will never meet the reader. Our written utterances are shaped by our expectations of how a reader may respond to what we say, formed on the basis of our participation in previous dialogues". In the online space, writing tutors (or ALL advisers) step into the place of that unknown reader, and their questions, challenges and responses may help to heighten the student writer's inner dialogue and make it more productive.

There are other, more immediately obvious benefits of the use of online tutoring for students. Students have a written record of all comments made and all interaction with the tutor which they can then reflect on at their leisure (Jackson, 2000; Clarke, 2000; Rilling, 2005). The online tutor can include links to relevant information available on websites with their comments. As Jackson (p. 5 of 8) writes, students appreciate "the mixture of information-based direction and questioning". And the asynchronous nature of the communication enables students with busy schedules and multiple commitments to participate at their leisure.

4. Academic advising at a distance

The online medium is ideal for many students who are studying at a distance and cannot physically visit a writing or academic skills centre. The use of email rather than synchronous technologies such as chat (which are available at CQU through our learning management system) is preferred by students in this cohort, who overwhelmingly have work and/or family commitments that make it inconvenient or impossible for them to schedule synchronous meetings. At CQU, the provision of one-on-one assistance online is reserved for distance students, who make up around 45% of the total number of students who use the Communications Learning Centre (CLC).

Like their on-campus counterparts, distance students are given an appointment time, but unlike on-campus students, they are not expected to be present during that time. Instead, they send their draft assignments in by email and the ALL adviser sets aside the scheduled appointment time to read and comment on the assignment. ALL advisers make comments directly on to the assignment using Word's Insert Comment function, and may model corrections using Track Changes. They will make any overall or general comments by email when they return the assignment file to the student.

For the adviser, the difference between a face-to-face tutorial and an online one is quite stark. As Anderson (2002, p. 77) puts it, "the tutor who knows a student in an email tutorial knows a text". When a student walks into an adviser's office, a large amount of information is quickly and effortlessly exchanged, some of it through conversation, some through the myriad cues that make up non-verbal communication. The information gathered by the adviser – ranging from what the student is studying to their attitude towards writing to how open they are to discussion and dialogue – will be used to help identify where the student is in their development as a writer and, accordingly, the best approach to take to the tutoring. By contrast, all the adviser knows about a distance student is the student's name, the course for which the assignment is due, the type of assignment they are submitting, and the referencing style they are required to use. Everything else must be garnered from the text. As a rule, the text does provide many clues, but they are different than those provided in face-to-face interaction, and because of the one-off nature of the communication, there is little opportunity for advisers to receive the kind of feedback that would enable them to verify the hypotheses they have formed.

The following case studies focus on three students studying at a distance who pose three distinct scenarios for the online ALL adviser. They represent the scenarios I most often encounter in my work with distance students; almost every student I work with has at some point fitted into one of these scenarios (and often more than one). The interactions described are based on feedback I have given and comments I have made, and actual students' responses to them. They are conceived as the beginnings of a critical narrative about the practice of academic advising online, and suggest the necessity of a diversity of models, including both a modified dialogical approach and a more prescriptive, information-based approach.

4.1. Case 1: General academic initiation

Lisa is 39 years old and studying for a degree in welfare. She lives at Barcaldine in western Queensland, some 500 km from the Rockhampton campus of CQU. She sent her very first university assignment to the CLC for "checking" before submitting it to her lecturer. At first glance, it seemed to be a bit of a mess. She had begun each sentence on a new line, had not clearly delineated her paragraphs, and had interlarded her sentences with big chunks of quoted material. As well, her approach to referencing was rather idiosyncratic. But on closer inspection it became clear that these problems were superficial. Her sentences were coherent, her ideas were organised, and she had engaged critically and analytically with the readings for the assignment. The issues with which she needed help were almost all to do with her lack of familiarity with the basic conventions of academic writing: how to lay out her page, how to integrate quotations into her text, how to document her sources in a consistent style.

In my comments on Lisa's assignment, I addressed both simple formatting issues – how to lay out a paragraph – and more complex ideas about how to integrate source material into a written piece using quotations and paraphrasing. I did some modelling (giving her an example of one way to integrate a quotation into one of her existing sentences) and provided links to informational handouts on paraphrasing and summarising as well as to a sample essay.

I also spent some time explaining some simple referencing techniques. She had already downloaded the relevant referencing guide and had tried to apply it; my role was to give her feedback on where she had applied it correctly and where she needed to do further work. It seemed clear that she had understood the principles of referencing and needed help only with the mechanics. For instance, at the end of one paragraph, she had written: "This information comes from the book *Ethics and the Law*", which showed a commitment to acknowledging her

source, but a lack of knowledge about how to do so. Again, I provided a model for Lisa to follow, and referred her to the relevant page of the referencing guide.

When I had finished working on the assignment, I felt a bit uneasy about the number of comments and suggestions I had made, afraid she might feel daunted by the online equivalent of what Rilling (2005, p. 363) calls “the bloody battlefield of the red pen”. I wrote her a friendly note explaining that my comments were aimed at helping her bring her assignment into line with expected university format and conventions, and not a reflection on the quality of her ideas or her writing.

Within a day, Lisa emailed back to express gratitude for my feedback, which she described as “extremely constructive”. Later in the term, when I received another assignment from her, I could hardly believe it was from the same student. There were no formatting or referencing issues at all, and only a few minor technical issues. By the end of the term, Lisa had assimilated the technical conventions of academic writing.

4.2. Case 2: Discipline-specific initiation

Brian is 50 years old and enrolled in an arts degree as a part-time, external student. He has been using the services of the CLC for three years, at a steady rate of two or three assignments per term. His work is usually coherent at the global level, and he has no serious problems at the technical level, beyond the occasional run-on sentence or awkward bit of phrasing. His main challenge is the sheer diversity of academic genres he is required to master as part of his degree. He is taking a very eclectic mix of courses which has so far included environmental studies, geography, multimedia, literary studies and history. In his environmental studies and geography courses, he has been required to write technical reports that have involved finding and analysing data (such as population statistics), maps and figures. In his multimedia courses, he has had to write first-person “justifications” to accompany technical projects reflecting on the processes he underwent, the decisions he made, and the literature he consulted. In his literary studies courses, he has been required to produce annotated bibliographies, write essays analysing literary texts and films, keep film and text journals, and write a short story. In history, he has had to learn to work with, and document, primary sources. Across these various courses, he has had to use three different referencing systems, two of them author-date, one documentary note. It is not hard to see why Brian continues to send his assignments to CLC, even though he is now an experienced student and competent writer.

As an external student, Brian does not have ready access either to his course lecturers or to fellow students, so he is unable to check his understandings of assignment instructions as an on-campus student would. He does read the assignment requirements provided by his lecturers and researches relevant formats on the CLC website. Then he has a go at using the particular format required, and sends it to the CLC for feedback. In this sense, Brian’s first attempt to use a particular academic genre is the opening up of a dialogue with his ALL adviser; he does not explicitly ask questions, but his questions are apparent to the adviser from the choices he has made in preparing his draft assignment. The adviser can reply to these questions either directly, with information, where appropriate, or in a non-directive way, with questions of her own designed to stimulate Brian’s own thinking about how he might make the best use of the genre to communicate his ideas. Typically, I respond in both ways to Brian’s drafts, suggesting technical changes to bring his work into line with formatting, expression and other conventions of a particular genre, and raising questions that I hope will lead him to reflect on his work in a global sense.

4.3. Case 3: Global-level engagement

Cherie is a 28-year-old psychology student who is studying externally and taking only one or two courses each term. Cherie submits her essays to the CLC when she can; she makes regular appointments for online assistance at the beginning of each term, but often cancels them because she hasn’t completed as much work as she had hoped by the time of the appointment.

Because she is studying both psychology and sociology, she has had to learn two very different approaches to essay writing, and two styles of author-date referencing.

Cherie is comfortable with the conventions of the academic essay in her discipline areas, having refined her skills in this area over several terms. She likes to receive feedback on early drafts of her essays and several times has submitted a first draft of an essay and then, a week later, a revised draft of the same essay. She is able to do this because – unlike many students – she begins work on her assignments well before the due date.

A typical first draft from Cherie will contain a sketchy introduction, an incomplete conclusion (or none at all), and a series of paragraphs that are at times little more than research notes. My response to such drafts is to focus on the emergence of her thesis, the structure and relevance of her key points, the nature of her evidence, and the way she is building her argument. I am careful not to challenge her autonomy as a writer and thinker, or her ownership of the material. In general, I couch my comments as questions such as: “Is this your argument?”, “My question on reading this was: who says so?”, “What is the key idea you are trying to get across here?” and “How is this idea related to the one in the previous paragraph?” Occasionally, I have commented that I cannot follow a particular argument, or that her conclusions do not seem to me to follow from her argument.

Cherie makes up her own mind about which of my comments to take on board. When I read her second drafts, I am always interested to see what she has made of my suggestions, and thrilled when a new line of thought has developed or a clearer argument emerged. I will make the same kinds of comments and suggestions on her second draft, as well as identifying any technical problems she needs to focus on when she does her final proof-reading.

5. Discussion and conclusions

In each of these three cases, the role of the online tutor was different, though there were also areas of overlap. Only in the third case, that of Cherie, was the American dialogical model approximated with any kind of fidelity. With Cherie, the most productive role for the ALL adviser to play was that of the first reader of her work – the one who “listens” to the text and gives the writer feedback on what it actually says, as opposed to what it is intended to say. This role is invaluable for any writer, but particularly for external students who tend to be isolated from other students who might play that role for them. Because Cherie began work on each assignment early, multiple interactions were possible through a series of conferences which constituted a form of dialogue. Though Cherie did not explicitly “answer” the questions raised by the ALL adviser, her revisions were implicit responses, which in turn stimulated further questions. It seems likely that the benefits Cherie gained from this interaction were similar to those Harris (1995) identified as the key strengths of the use of a dialogical model in the face-to-face environment.

Some level of dialogue was also present with Brian, but the main issues raised in his texts were not questions to be teased out and explored but rather matters of established convention. The ALL adviser’s role was to help him interpret the conventions of each genre and to apply them in a way that would facilitate the expression of his own ideas or experience. As a result, many of the comments on Brian’s assignments were prescriptive or directive rather than open-ended, and included informational links and modelling.

Similarly, interactions with Lisa tended to be more prescriptive. What Lisa seemed primarily to lack was an understanding of the general conventions of academic writing, a product, no doubt, of her lack of recent experience with formal education. The ALL adviser’s role was to give Lisa the information she needed to understand the academic conventions with which she was unfamiliar. The benefit of the one-on-one tutorial is that this information could be given in a highly contextualised way, as a response to the specific needs of a specific assignment.

These case studies suggest that while there is always an element of dialogue in the online tutorial – the student opens the dialogue simply by submitting her or his paper – the key

characteristics of the dialogical model may not always be dominant in the online environment, at least when operating with distance students. With students whose primary need is for initiation into academic or genre conventions, it may be appropriate for the ALL adviser to be more prescriptive. The ease and speed with which Lisa assimilated general academic writing conventions suggest that students can learn much from immediate, contextualised feedback and modelling of accepted practice.

There are also, however, opportunities to play the role of “listener and reader” championed by North. When this is a student’s primary need, the strategies of non-directive questioning and comments aimed at stimulating reflection can be highly effective. Despite the asynchronous nature of the medium, the student and tutor can engage in a form of conversation that begins at the place the student is at, and touches on her own writing process. Just as the tutor reads and responds to the student’s draft, so the student reads and responds (in her revisions) to the tutor’s comments; the comments the student chooses not to respond to are as much a part of the dialogue as those she does.

To anyone engaged in face-to-face tutoring, the strengths of the dialogical model seem self-evident. Yet there are weaknesses, too, particularly in the area of academic initiation where, as Boczkowski (2006) points out, to stick to a strictly non-directive questioning approach may be to withhold information that would free up the writer to focus on developing effective writing processes. In the online medium, the ALL adviser has much less to go on than in the face-to-face tutorial. Yet the principle of beginning with the student’s needs remains a constant. An evaluation of the student’s needs based on a reading of his/her text is inherently dialogic. Whether the dialogue continues in a directive or a non-directive way will depend not so much on technological constraints as on what the student’s needs are determined to be. Both approaches are appropriate, and both can be highly effective in the online medium. Ideally, further models will emerge as student needs evolve and online advising becomes more widespread.

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