



THE INKBLOT

AUS Writing Center Journal 2025 Edition

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EDITORS' NOTE

Manal Nadeem

This year, The Inkblot Magazine invited the AUS community to reflect on the following prompt:

“Patchworks are, put literally, pieces of cloth stitched together. They are a union of colors, textures, and materials married to form a beautiful, intricate whole. Done well, they can make both sprawling tapestries and pocket-sized handkerchiefs. Done not-so-well, they can unravel and come undone at the seams.

Rich with symbolism, “Patchworks” is an invitation to pick apart the seams of the self and reflect on the collections and composites that make you who you are—of identities, memories, places, languages, and more. In an age of speed, patchworks can also be products of patient labor and love and delicate devotion. Or an emblem of tradition enduring in the face of modernity. What does “patchworks” mean to you?”

This year's theme, "Patchworks", emerged from a unanimous editorial decision. We agreed that it was a metaphor waiting to be mined—one that was compelling in its unresolved meaning, the absence of any prescriptive definition, in how it gestured both towards process and product: towards fragments and fractures; towards beauty and brokenness; towards parts coalescing and converging to form a beautiful, if precarious, whole.

The entries we publish here, selected from an open call for submissions, capture the multiplicity and plurality inherent to patchworks. **Nouran Azzam's** *A Stitched Life* offers patchworks as a metaphor for metamorphosis, for growth and self-actualization. **Maryam Abdulla's** *Lining* deconstructs patchworks into a series of processes: of sewing, stitching, and mending the self in order to memorialize the past. **Nourhan Ibrahim's** *Patchwork Consumerism* infuses 'patchworks' with both sociological and sentimental meaning and considers how "patchwork consumerism"—the frenzied impulse to own and acquire items as a display of identity including, most recently, Labubus—can become a gateway to community.

Our academic entries, selected from *WRI 221: Peer Tutoring* coursework, consider 'patchworks' as pedagogical inquiries. **Fahimah Saiyed** and **Manal Nadeem** both anchor themselves in the diverse demographic landscape of AUS and consider, respectively, how tutor-tutee relationships impact writing center outcomes and how diverse secondary backgrounds influence preparedness for university academic writing. Meanwhile, **Yousef Alafghani** considers the shifting pedagogy of the Writing Center in the age of AI and **Noha Eldib** and **Zaynab Ghani** situate the Writing Center in cross-disciplinary conversations of pedagogy and psychology.

Editing this issue, in all its poetic and prosaic plurality, has been a source of much joy to our team over the past few weeks and months. We hope these will offer fruitful fodder for reflections on the multiplicities that make us who we are. As always, happy inkblotting and introspecting!

A STITCHED LIFE

Nouran Azzam

On my dry, crusty lashes are the memory of every tear I shed, of every pain I felt,
Every person I longed for and grieved,
And every version of myself I could never become.

On my left index finger is a small white scar,
Flesh removed
From when I had an accident with an X-Acto knife,
Crafting, building, stitching a model for scenic design.
A classmate rushed to bandage my bleeding wound,
And suddenly they were no longer a stoic judge
But now a nursing soul.

On my chin
Is a small depression
From where I had a giant bump
In my childhood chicken pox days.
I thought I was growing pubescent at the time,
So, I put on my helmet
To go to war with myself.

On my nose
Are blackheads and bumps,
Reminders of my shame,
Reminders
Of that one time I thought I looked like a witch
Or when this one girl told me I need to try to look
More beautiful.

There are no holes in my earlobes because our father couldn't bear
To see his daughters cry from a needle puncturing their skin for aesthetics.
But we got needles, alright.
Many needles; vaccines to quench our parents' fears,
Leaving a scar on my arm.

In my mind, I hear screaming / From when my sister and I / Continuously ran away / From our mother's slipper. / Comedic to some, / But tragic to us.

My left heel has an inflamed
Ligament, a supposed mediator of bones
But now an adversary hindering my every move,
A reminder of my poor health, as I watch everyone around me
Walk on air.

My cuticles: the victims of my constant, compulsive scratching. I scratched them
To appease the voices.

My thinning hair,
A constant disappointment to me,
But now a child I love dearly.
I gave it vibrant colors, spa sessions, and a repair in a torn relationship.

My heart.
Poke it once,
And the chambers tear at the stitches.

Poke it twice, and your finger is drenched in blood.
The blood with memories of a child
Abandoned on her birthday,
Waiting for her mother
To show up for once.
Poke this heart again,
And you'll have four gooey chambers
In your palms, and the blood will
Fill up the creases on your skin,
Illuminating in red
Your heart line,
Life line,
Love line –
Is there no love line?

My teeth,
Collecting dust in a cup
In a dimly lit bathroom.

Countless medical visits.
Pain with no gain.

My spirit
About to be killed
At the age of seventeen
When my soul slowly
Found its way out between
The patches of my life.
But I stitched and stitched some more
So it had nowhere to go.

The biggest chasm, perhaps, is the one between body and mind. Then I met Yoga.
I used to fight demons alone.
Shadows that slither their way into the cracks of my skull –
Yoga told me,
“Danger where there is none.”

A fragmented mind where internal family systems taught me that there are no bad parts and that I can find safety in my body again when I give my child what it needs. A hug, reassurance, love, warmth, and a home.

My arms,
Smooth but were once not going to be.
Stitched well
But were once not going to be.
Kept me alive,
But were once not going to.
Kept the blood underneath
But were once not going to.
Shame and blame
Ride in a train
To tell me in vain
That I will lose my veins.

Can I hook my fingers together
And call them pals?
Can I clap my hands

And call it a celebration?
Can I pinch my skin
And call it self-regulation?
Can I cry my eyes out
And say it was all for... nothing?

Choked laughter, fragmented by salty tears, and a ruddy face meet me in my mind's eye
And suddenly I realize that no life is infrangible,
We are all pieces,
We are all Matryoshkas.
We all try to build the giant foam puzzles laid out in children's playrooms, like carpets for
little feet to walk on, not fearing the cold hard floor beneath.

I clasp my hands together,
One hand a starry night sky,
The other a sunny blue,
And I make them lovers.
To love the body
Is to meet the body
Where it's at.

Thank you, yoga, for teaching me to slow down. Thank you, fellow nurse, for healing my
wound. Thank you, lashes, for holding my teardrops.
Thank you, heart, for your resilience.

Above all,
I watch as my mind and body
Slowly circle one another,
Celestial spheres
Composing harmonious
Music.
Musica universalis.
But they never touch.
They never heal.
One day,
One day,
Lovers will unite
In eternity.



LINING

Maryam Abdulla

There is a version of me you have probably met. It is neat. Polished. It holds up under pressure, dries fast when soaked, is resilient in a way that looks impressive from afar. It moves through the world like it belongs, and sometimes it almost convinces me. But there is a cost to that kind of utility. There is a stiffness, a brittleness, a shine that looks like strength but cracks if you pull too hard at the seams. That exterior, what I have learned to show, is functional. Synthetic. Not breathable. Suffocating.

Beneath it, there is something else entirely. Softer. Slower. Less put-together. It wrinkles easily. It clings to memory, absorbs and holds on to more than it should. It is the part of me that remembers the way someone said goodbye, not just the words but the temperature of the air, the sound of a door closing, the rustle of fabric as they shift away. It is the echo of their voice fading, leaving a hum in the silence that follows. It is the part that cries at scenes in movies that are not sad, just quietly true. The part that makes note of the exact warmth of sunlight slipping past the curtains, because for a moment, it felt like a person I miss.

No one really sees that lining. At least, not unless they are looking hard. I keep it tucked under layers of functionality and performance. Most people are content with what is on the surface, and I have become good at tailoring it to fit.

Still, I think about the stitching a lot: The way everything holds together. How some pieces of myself do not match and were not meant to. How some parts fray faster than others. There are versions of me that grew out of specific places and times, dialects I picked up and then dropped, hobbies I tried because someone I loved... loved them first. Some of those parts no longer feel like "me," but I keep them anyway, stitched into the larger whole.

That is the thing about patchworks. They do not always start deliberately. Sometimes they are just the result of necessity: wear and tear, damage control, sentimentality. You patch what you cannot bear to throw away. And over time, the mending becomes its own kind of design.

My father taught me how to sew. Not professionally, not even particularly well. He showed me how to thread the machine, how to guide the fabric without forcing it, how to listen for the change in sound when something was not right. My stitches were clumsy at first, too tight, too loose, lines that wandered off course, but he said it did not have to be perfect to be strong. What mattered was that it held. Over time, I began to understand that sewing was not just about fixing things. It was about staying with what had come apart. Sitting with the damage. Believing that a tear did not mean the end. That with enough thread, enough care, you could teach something to hold again even if the seam showed. I think about that often: How much care it takes to mend something. The closeness it demands. How you have to look at a thing long enough to understand where it came undone.

I did not inherit his patience with a needle. But I did inherit his impulse: to salvage. To preserve. Maybe that is why I have kept pieces of people long after they have left. A song I skip every time, but never remove from the queue. The old version of myself they once believed in. None of these things make sense side by side, but they are stitched into me anyway.

I used to think all of this made me inconsistent. Fragmented. A collection of borrowed colours and mismatched textures. But now I am starting to believe that this very layering, this irregularity is a kind of coherence too. Maybe it is not the seamlessness that holds us together, but the stitching itself. The willingness to bind what does not naturally belong, and to wear it anyway.

There is something beautiful in that labour. In the choice to make meaning out of the disparate, the damaged, the inherited. In refusing the illusion of uniformity. Not everything has to match to belong.

Still, it is hard. Sometimes I catch myself envying those who seem to live in a single fabric, who appear unconflicted, smooth, whole. Their identities do not bleed when soaked in water too warm. Their languages do not get stuck in their throat. Their memories do not interrupt the present with sharp, sudden edges. But maybe that is just another illusion. Maybe we all wear layers. Some people are just better at hiding the stitching.

There are days when the exterior wears thin. When the practiced responses fail, when the small talk tastes like ash. When I want to turn myself inside out and just say what I mean. But I do not. Not always. Vulnerability does not move freely in public spaces. It does not breathe, does not hold up to friction.

It stains too easily.

So I keep that inner fabric close. Protected. I let it warm me in silence. I let it whisper the things I cannot say out loud. It knows me better than the outer layers do. It does not perform. It remembers.

Patchworks do not hide damage; they acknowledge it. They say, "Here is where I tore, and here is where I held myself together anyway." There is no shame in being mended. There is grace in the repair.

I am not seamless. But I am held.



PATCHWORK CONSUMERISM

Nourhan Ibrahim

“This was from my graduation, and this was for my birthday. My friend made it!” my friend said as she showed me the things displayed in her room. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that 90% of the items displayed were given by others. Dried graduation flowers and photos of the places she had been to, each carrying their own memories. I turned to her. “It’s like that one post! You’re a mosaic of everyone you ever loved!”

The post in question originated from Tumblr and circulates widely on social media. The idea is, in essence, the same as the concept of patchworks. Both patchworks and mosaics evoke imagery full of deliberation. When I think of how you become a patchwork of the people you love, it’s quite subtle and unintentional. Suddenly, you use their vocabulary. You see something they like and get so excited as if you are the one who likes it, and all that is in a similar vein. One could argue that the seams are sewn and strengthened by the bonds between you and those you love. A fair argument to make, yet it doesn’t capture the deliberation that comes to mind, more specifically, what comes to my mind when I think of patchworks.

When I tried to think of the patchworks in my life, I was stuck. I couldn’t really tell what mannerisms of mine were borrowed. Maybe I have acquired the patchworks for so long that they have become part of my skin, indistinguishable from me. Interestingly, I can think of clear patchworks in my life, but they weren’t taken from people. They were taken from things. Even more interesting was that I could see the physical manifestation of my patchworks.

One thing about me is that I have never had fleeting interests; with each interest, I feel a strong need to possess.

In the first years of school, the choice of school bag felt so significant. Of course, part of that could be because seven-year-old me had yet to make any significant decisions. But part of it was a subconscious awareness that my choice of bags reflects on me. I am to display what I love the most, so I have to be sure that what people see is true to me.

I'm happy to say that, despite gaining self-awareness of this habit, I am still the same. All-consuming interests have remained a constant in my life, typically taking the form of a show, band, or book series. Simple consumption never satisfied my hunger; I always needed a physical manifestation: a pin, a poster, something to hold onto. The question is: why is this even necessary? It's not like I need to remind myself that I like something. I already know. But the posters, fitting neatly next to each other, are, in every sense, my patchwork. One that I actively sew together and then display. These patchworks become much more than what I like; they become who I am. Because, for the most part, I am what I love. Sometimes, I find myself picking up the language of my interests. My thoughts echo the narrative voice, and even my perception of the world bends to whatever passion I'm immersed in at the time.

What is most interesting about this experience is that it's not unique to me. If you look around campus, you'll easily spot keychains and pins attached to bags. If you've spent any time online in geeky spaces, you're probably familiar with Funko Pop collectors or other figure and doll enthusiasts, like Barbie doll collectors. Recently, people have become obsessed with Sonny Angels, Labubus, and just about any collectible item out there. Collections have always existed, but the current intensity of obsession feels distinctly new. Part of the thrill of collecting Labubus, for example, comes from the blind box aspect, but that's a whole other can of worms.

In fact, thinking about these things brings to mind an image filled with plastic boxes. It's not an exaggeration to say that geeky spaces, and now popular culture too, are plagued by *Patchwork Consumerism*. I call it *Patchwork Consumerism* rather than pure consumerism because it carries a lot more personal feelings.

This ownership isn't just about the love of buying or consuming; it's also about reaffirming something essential about one's own identity in a way that feels deliberate and physical. The physical manifestation of one's interests and identity is often more valuable and easier to understand. It's like the feeling you get after crocheting a big blanket and wrapping yourself in it. There's comfort in being surrounded by the things that make you, *you*.

That said, this doesn't negate the fact that *Patchwork Consumerism* is, at the end of the day, still a form of consumerism and doesn't excuse its environmental impact. The world has long been overwhelmed by consumer culture, and it was only a matter of time before identity became so deeply tied to consumption in ways many don't stop to question.

I'm not here to judge, not only because I, too, am guilty of *Patchwork Consumerism*, but also because I want to better examine this phenomenon. It becomes clear that *Patchwork Consumerism* is unique when you consider that people don't just want to own these items; they want to display them in ways that show others these things are part of their interests and identity. Keychains on bags, for example, have been a great way to find like-minded people. For me, especially at this university, they've been central to building connections.

Although *Patchwork Consumerism* has its flaws, the way it creates community is unique. Part of what people seek when they engage in it is the moment someone says, "Oh, I love your keychain! I also like that show!" which often leads to refreshing small talk or even the start of a dear friendship. While the desire to indulge and own a lot can sometimes feel overwhelming, a few keychains on your bag can do the job.



CURRICULUMS AND COMPETENCY: COMPARING PREPAREDNESS FOR UNIVERSITY WRITING ACROSS SCHOOL CURRICULUMS IN THE UAE

Manal Nadeem

Abstract

The UAE consistently underperforms on global academic benchmark tests. This is particularly intensified in the transition from secondary to tertiary education where a lack of preparedness for the demands of a tertiary education becomes apparent. However, research on educational inequality in the UAE lacks on several fronts. Existing research on educational inequality in the UAE has tended to focus predominantly on educational inequalities between public and private schools or nationals and expats. This dichotomous approach mimics public/private binaries in Western pedagogical discourses and obscures the unique context of the UAE—namely, the demographic diversity of the UAE and how this maps onto the various curricula taught across primary and secondary schools in the UAE. This paper aims to deconstruct the dichotomies that characterize research on educational inequalities in the UAE by presenting survey research conducted at the American University of Sharjah. Specifically, this survey provides preliminary evidence that confirms systematic disparities in educational outcomes across curricula. The paper then outlines areas for future research and provides recommendations on how to apply this research to the context of local education institutions.

Keywords: academic writing, educational inequality, writing proficiency, curriculum

Introduction

The first time I became conscious of systematic disparities in writing instruction in the UAE was when I arrived at university. In my introductory Academic Writing classes (WRI 101 and WRI 102), I struggled with conducting independent research using scholarly sources and familiarizing myself with academic citation systems such as APA, neither of which I had encountered during my secondary education. Meanwhile, some of my peers from various curricula, such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) and American curricula, had experienced both. At the same time, having come from a British curriculum school, I was the beneficiary of deeply entrenched cultural capital—native English-speaking teachers and rigorous essay writing assignments—that gave me relative confidence in the English language. This dual awareness, both of the advantages and disadvantages I had incurred through my secondary education, catalyzed my curiosity in how global pedagogical discourses on educational inequality translated to the context of the UAE. Particularly, I became fascinated with how the demographic diversity of the UAE—widely recognized as a diverse country with one of the highest expat-to-local ratios of anywhere in the world (Vora, 2015)—mapped onto the primary and secondary education landscape. In turn, I became curious about the implications of this fragmented secondary education landscape for a university like the American University of Sharjah (AUS) where mostly monolingual, English-only writing instruction must respond to the diverse and heterogeneous educational histories of its students, depending on their past encounters and experiences with writing instruction and their relative confidence in academic writing in English. As a result, this paper presents survey research conducted at AUS in order to better understand the relationship between school curriculum and academic writing preparedness in the UAE. Specifically, my working thesis is that school curricula that equip their students with higher-order composition and critical thinking skills, as well as train them in argumentative tasks, best prepare their students for success in academic writing while curricula that equip students with comprehension and literacy skills as well as train them in narrative/exposition tasks produce less prepared students.

Global ‘Achievement Gap’

Educational inequality has been the subject of much research worldwide. Landmark studies in the sociology of education, such as Paul Willis’s *Learning to Labor* which explores disillusionment amongst working-class male students in London, focus on the effects of social identities such as class, gender, and ethnicity on educational achievement. These differential educational outcomes are variously called the “achievement gap” and the “education debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 24). While some research focuses primarily on structural inequalities such as socioeconomic status, others look at the everyday mechanisms—such as cultural capital—which produce these inequalities (Rubin, 2014).

The study of writing skills, meanwhile, is complicated by the lack of consensus on what constitutes writing proficiency. Different writers have deployed different metrics to operationalize this elusive construct. For example, Deane et al. (2008) deconstructs “writing skills” into three skill levels: language and literacy skills (automatic); document-creation and document-management-skills (strategic); and critical-thinking skills (cognitive). Others, like Matsumo (2019), adopt a more process-oriented approach to writing proficiency, disaggregating the writing process into ‘before writing’ and ‘after writing.’ Over the last five decades, a sophisticated standardized testing regime—encompassing tests such as PISA, IELTS, and TOEFL—has emerged globally. However, the use of these tests as a measure of writing proficiency only reflects one-off grades and bypasses important questions around the mechanisms at the primary and secondary school level that produce systematically different writing outcomes.

‘Achievement Gap’ in the UAE

There is a dearth of equivalent research on educational disparities, and specifically disparities in writing outcomes, in the UAE. Where such research has been conducted in the UAE, the operating distinction is often between public and private schools. This distinction reflects categories used in Western pedagogical literature where the public/private school binary is highly charged and contentious. For example, in the UK, private/public schools reflect deeply corrosive class fault lines and signify socioeconomic inequalities (Edwards, 2020).

More contextualized studies tailored to the UAE use the categories of “national” and “expatriate” as in the “national-expatriate education gap” (Marquez, 2022) to demonstrate that, contrary to global trends, expats significantly outperform local students in the UAE. However, these dichotomies are still not analytically useful for the UAE where there is arguably more diversity within these categories—whether “public/private” or “national/expatriate”—than between them; talking exclusively in dichotomous terms obscures the vast internal diversity contained within these broad categories. For example, while public schools (mostly) cater to the minority of local Emirati students, the private sector abounds with schools of various curriculums—British (GCSE’s), Indian (CBSE), American, French, Filipino, and Pakistani, amongst others—that cater to a diverse clientele segmented along nationality and socioeconomic status (Matsumoto, 2019). Oversimplified binary categories fail to capture this curricular diversity.

Educational History in the UAE

Prior to independence, the UAE had no Ministry of Education under the British (Gobert, 2019). Lacking a curriculum of its own, the country initially imported the national curriculum of the Kuwaiti Ministry of Education. It was at the turn of the century that the UAE’s still-fledgling educational landscape began to crystallize and consolidate into its current form. In 2008, the ‘New School Model,’ now called the ‘Emirati School Model,’ was adopted in Abu Dhabi and used across all Ministry of Education schools throughout the UAE (Gobert, 2019, p. 118). These schools mandated the use of English instruction for mathematics and science and introduced native English-speaking teachers to replace the previously mostly Arab teachers.

In parallel to the public school system, the private sector also began to boom in the UAE in the early 2000’s. The growth of the private sector reflects the neoliberal economic model of the country, where noncitizen expats must access public goods—such as education and healthcare—through private, market-based, and often expensive provision (Vora, 2008). Perhaps nowhere is this private education industry boom better embodied than in the remarkable expansion of the education conglomerate, Global Education Management System (GEMS), which operates more than fifty private schools across the country with five different curricula (Gobert, 2019, p. 119).

Below Benchmark Performance in the UAE

The UAE has consistently underperformed on global benchmark tests. In 2006, the UAE had a failure rate of 47% on the Preliminary English Test (PET) (Gobert, 2019, p. 120). More recently, the UAE ranked below the world average in international benchmarks like the PISA test (Program for International Student Assessment) which assesses competence amongst fifteen-year old students worldwide in reading, mathematics, and science (Marquez et al., 2022).

This lack of academic preparedness becomes glaringly evident in the transition between secondary and tertiary education. For example, a UAE Ministry of Education study found that public school students were not adequately prepared for tertiary education in English, hence necessitating high-cost remedial foundation programs at universities aimed at public school students which amounted to 300 million AED in 2014 (Gobert, 2019). Indeed, this “quality gap” is observed not just in the UAE but across the Gulf region as well, including in neighboring countries such as Qatar where foundation programs receive exorbitant amounts of funding annually (Elhassan, 2019). Meanwhile, private schools in the UAE so vastly outperform public schools that there has been a growth in a hybrid category: government-funded private school providers, such as ALDAR Academies and Emirates National Schools, which are run by the federal government but offer international curriculums such as the British curriculum and International Baccalaureate respectively in order to cater to increased demand for private education (Gobert, 2019, p. 122).

Despite the various gaps in the literature, there are some promising studies on academic writing that begin to broach the questions this paper is interested in. One study finds that a lack of assignments geared towards critical thinking skills amongst curricula in the Gulf region can be attributed to the Western-style curricula that are not adapted to local contexts (Sperrazza and Raddawi, 2016). Through interventions that invite a set of university students to answer essay prompts on their local cultural contexts rather than Western ones, the study finds that students wrote more critically on the former than the latter. It is this nexus between different curricula and academic writing preparedness that the research below aims to better explore.

Primary Research

Research Questions and Objectives

This paper asks the following research questions: ‘How do different school curricula in the UAE prepare students for academic writing at the university level?’ Related sub-questions also include the following: ‘What writing skills were students trained in at school?’, ‘What type of writing tasks were students exposed to at school?’, and ‘How much exposure did students have to English outside of the classroom (at home, with friends, in leisure time)?’

Results

A preliminary analysis reveals vast disparities between students from different curricula. When asked how far they believed that their secondary education adequately prepared them for academic writing at the university level, 80% of students from American curriculum schools said ‘very prepared’ or ‘somewhat prepared.’ Conversely, 75% of students from national Ministry of Education schools said ‘hardly prepared’ or ‘not at all prepared.’

However, the objective of this research is not to construct a hierarchy of curricula as doing so risks reproducing normative understandings of who is, and can be, a proficient English writer. Instead of asking who, the goal is to ask how—that is, to interrogate the mechanisms that produce disparate writing outcomes at the tertiary level. Therefore, subsequent questions were designed to identify the specific pathways and mechanisms through which educational disparities are produced. Namely, survey questions were split into the following sections: questions on languages in order to understand the respondent’s linguistic portfolio both in order of fluency and in order of acquisition (for example, mother tongue, followed by second language); questions on timelines for when respondents acquired specific writing skills; and the most significant subset of questions was devoted to gauging the respondent’s relative confidence in specific writing skills. Deane’s (2008) typology of writing proficiency was employed to inform this research design, consisting of questions on language and literacy (automatic skills), writing-process management (strategic skills), and critical thinking (cognitive skills).

These trends of preparedness were consistent across questions, with students from American and British curriculum schools generally expressing greater preparedness for academic writing. The starkest disparities were apparent in responses to the question, 'How confident were you in conducting independent research in English using scholarly sources when you first started university?', to which 78% of American curriculum and 86% of British curriculum students responded 'extremely confident' or 'quite confident' while 75% of national curriculum students responded with 'not at all confident' or 'slightly confident.'

Questions about timelines also displayed this trend. When asked, 'When did you first learn how to conduct research using academic and scholarly sources?' American curriculum students were most likely to say they had done so 'before university' while 100% national curriculum students responded 'freshman year of university.' This confirms my hypothesis that some students arrive at university primed and prepared for academic writing more than others.

On the other hand, assessment types remain arguably the most contentious topic within the field of MENA writing instruction. One study finds that poor imitations of Western-style curriculums that are not adapted to local contexts have perpetuated a lack of critical thinking skills amongst students in the Gulf region (Sperrazza and Raddawi, 2016). Various interventions have been further proposed to address this gap. For example, Sperrazza and Raddawi (2016) compared results from a control group and an experimental group of university students assigned essay prompts to answer based on their local cultural contexts rather than Western ones and found that students performed better on these than conventional assignments. Furthermore, Al Naqbi (2011) found that incorporating mind mapping into writing assessments in public schools enabled greater information retrieval and processing for the primarily English as a second-language-speaking students. However, contrary to expectations, this survey did not confirm these findings. When asked about the frequency of their past experience with various writing assessments, AUS students did not demonstrate significant variations in their responses. Generally, students reported completing more descriptive assessments and fewer argumentative assessments, regardless of curriculum. Possible explanations for this discrepancy between the literature and survey results are explored further below.

Finally, the survey also aimed to account for the role of confounding variables which may be influencing writing outcomes. These included exposure to English, which was further broken down into exposure into verbal communication, online communication, and media consumption. When asked, 'How often did you speak English outside of school during your primary and secondary education?', the students from American, British and Indian curriculum schools all responded with 'daily' or 'few times a week' whereas no students from national curriculum schools said 'daily' and 100% said 'once a month', 'once a week', or 'never'. This is consistent with the extensive literature on "cultural capital", first formulated by Bourdieu (2018), which states that increased exposure to various forms of culture in a particular language—such as languages and books—accrues into a kind of non-financial capital which perpetuates privilege between generations.

Discussion

While beneficial for a preliminary assessment of key patterns, this survey would constitute only one step of a multi-stage methodology in a large-scale study of curricular diversity in the UAE. For example, a more comprehensive study may begin, first, with unstructured interviews with students to identify key themes that would inform both the types of questions and multiple-choice options to be asked in subsequent surveys. Instead of imposing predetermined themes, the insights that would emerge organically from these interviews would help account for, and preempt, themes that otherwise cannot be anticipated from the literature alone. For example, it is possible that the discrepancy between the literature and these survey results on the role of assessment types (descriptive, narrative, argumentative and persuasive) in writing confidence can be explained by inconsistencies in respondents' interpretations of keywords such as 'academic writing' or 'scholarly sources'; some outlier responses reported first encountering academic writing as early as the sixth grade. Future studies could account for this perhaps by including visual and pictorial evidence of a sample scholarly source (for example, to distinguish a mere news article from an academic journal article).

Moreover, these survey results are limited by the small sample size ($N= 31$). This does not just extend to the aggregate sample size—thirty-one respondents—but also to the distribution of responses.

For example, American, British and Indian curriculum students were overrepresented at nine, seven and eight responses respectively, making it harder to extrapolate these findings from the sample to the overall population of the student body in the UAE. To further diversify the sample, future studies may also wish to distribute the survey across the emirates of the UAE. Literature suggests that educational outcomes differ greatly across emirates—with high-achieving, English-medium private schools largely concentrated in the commercial hubs of Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah—and this intra-emirate disparity may act as a confounding variable.

A more rigorous comparison of curricula across the UAE may also wish to include methods other than surveys and interviews. This is because surveys over rely on self-reported confidence as an objective measure, or correlate, of writing competence. Demographic variability—such as the overrepresentation of females (87.1%)—may also further interfere with the validity of the data. Future studies may develop a more holistic rubric for analyzing the content of different curricula prevalent across the UAE. These may include classifying curricula according to criteria such as assessment types (whether they are largely multiple choice or independent writing assignments), assessment frequency and duration, and cultural fit between curriculum and student population (how far foreign curricula are tailored to the host country's culture).

Conclusion

Curricular diversity remains an unexplored area within academia in the Middle East and, particularly, the UAE. While most research has focused on the dichotomy between public and private education, the sheer diversity of curricula in the UAE warrant attention for their corresponding impacts on educational outcomes. This study provides a preliminary survey of these educational disparities at the American University of Sharjah. Namely, it gestures at inequalities across curricula in the nature of writing assessments, relative confidence in various automatic, strategic, and cognitive writing tasks, the timeline of students' first introduction to academic writing, and exposure to cultural capital. However, in order to be generalizable, future studies must expand the sample size across emirates, higher education institutions and curricula as well as consider more holistic assessments of curricula that extend beyond self-reported surveys.

Regardless of the above limitations, however, this study entails important implications for a tertiary education institution like the American University of Sharjah which welcomes students from a range of educational backgrounds every year. These implications extend not only to individual educators, but also to important campus programs and services such as the Achievement Academy Bridge Program and Writing Center. Specifically, future iterations of the Writing Center's pre-appointment form may include question(s) for tutees asking about their relative confidence and prior experience in academic writing as well as their high school curricular background; while these questions may function better as optional—rather than mandatory—they would enable tutors to better anticipate the needs of their tutee based on their educational history rather than entering sessions with uniform expectations. In parallel, tutors can be encouraged to share their high school curricular background in their tutor biographies—published on the AUS Writing Center website—in order to allow tutees to make an informed decision when selecting tutors. Finally, in the spirit of peer tutoring, the Achievement Academy Bridge Program (AABP) may also benefit from an in-house equivalent of the Writing Center. While this does not have to be of nearly the same scale as the Writing Center, it would allow students in the AABP to avail support and assistance from a peer and mentor who perhaps shares an education background and history and may be more conducive to egalitarian relationships between tutor and tutee built on solidarity rather than hierarchy.

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Appendix A

Figure A1

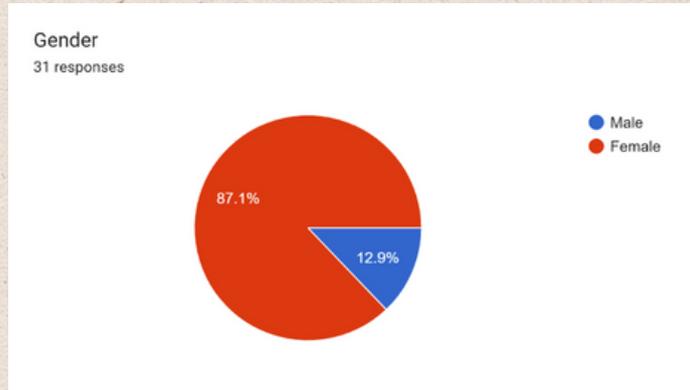


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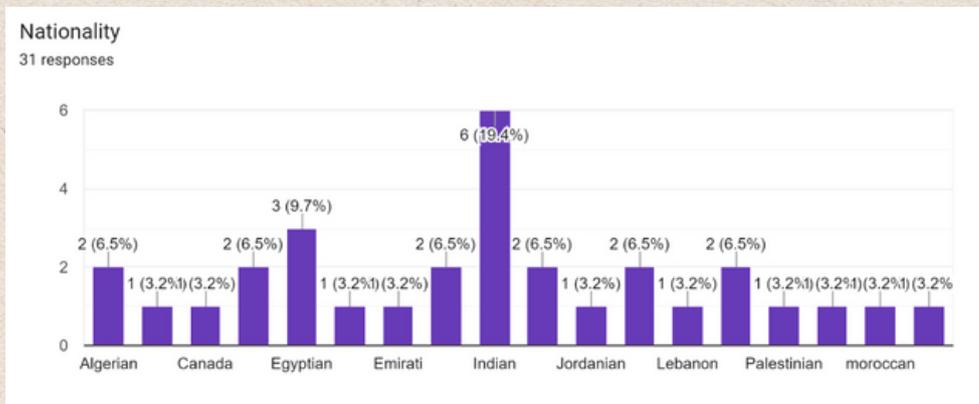


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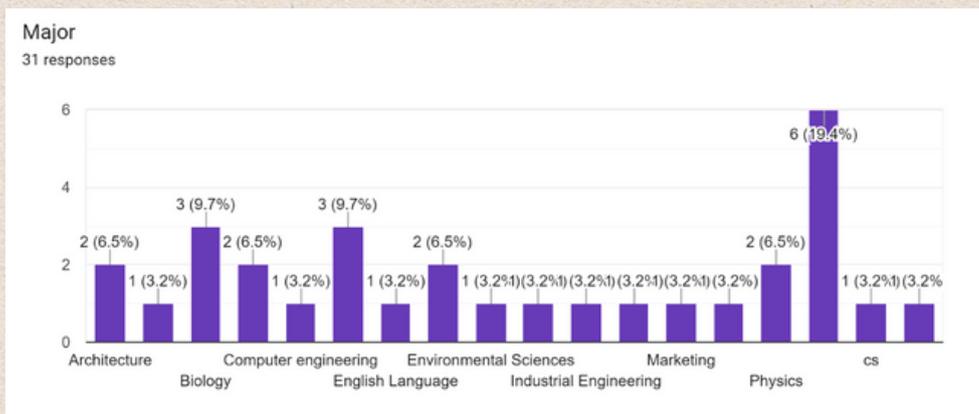


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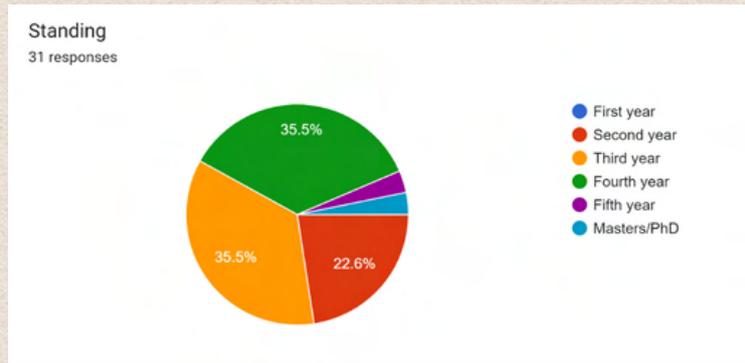


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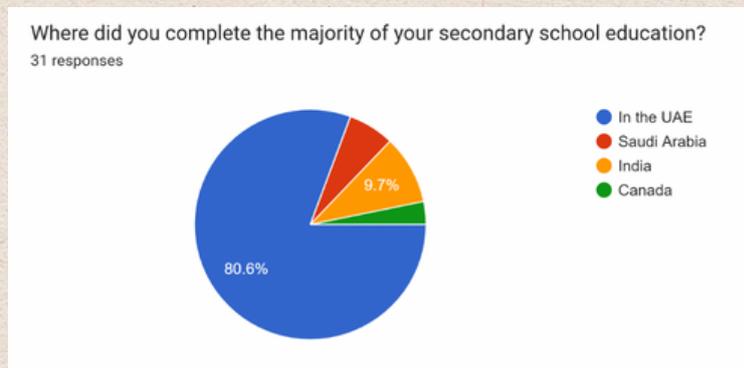


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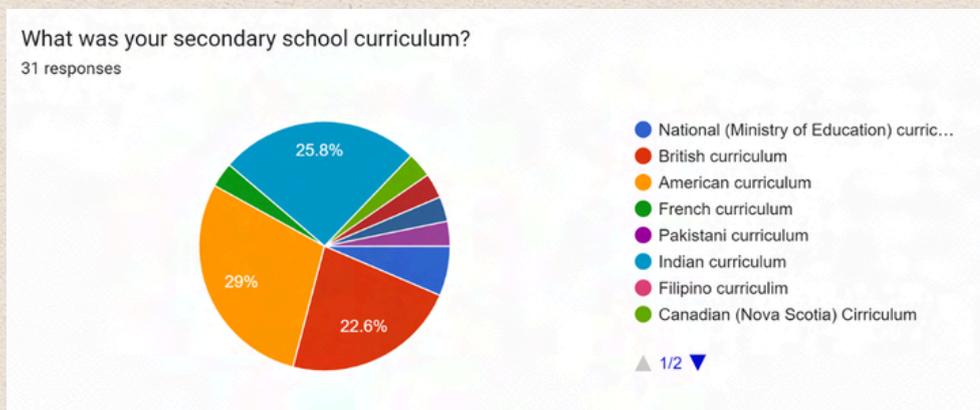


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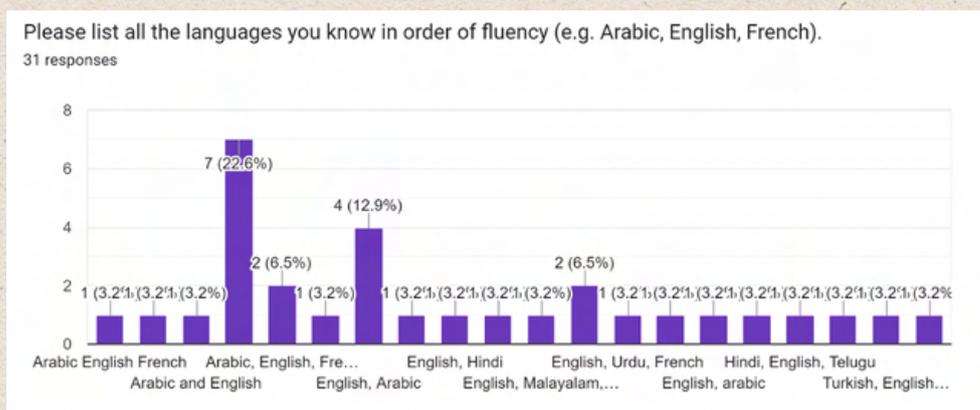


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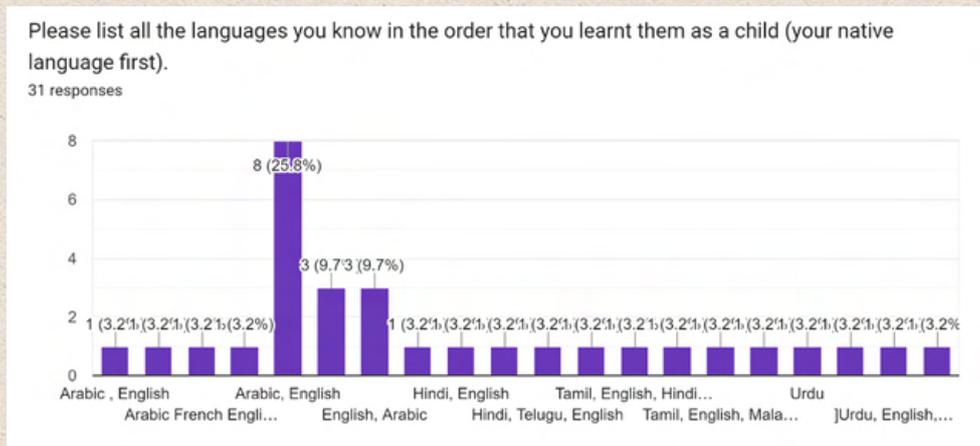


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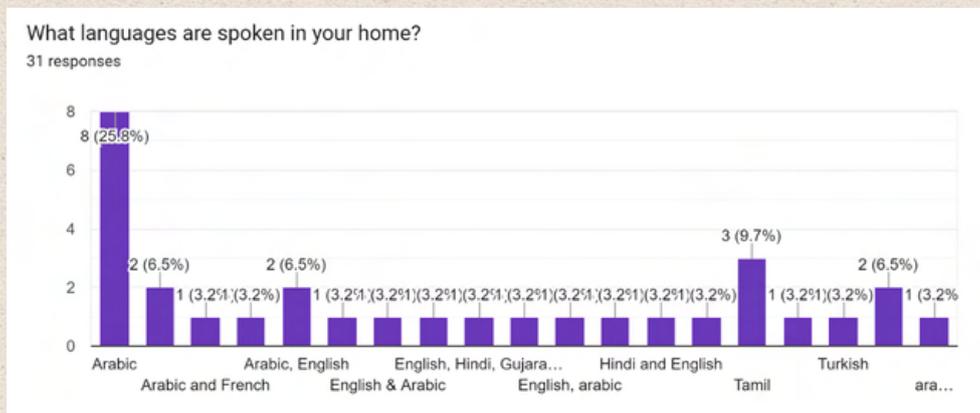


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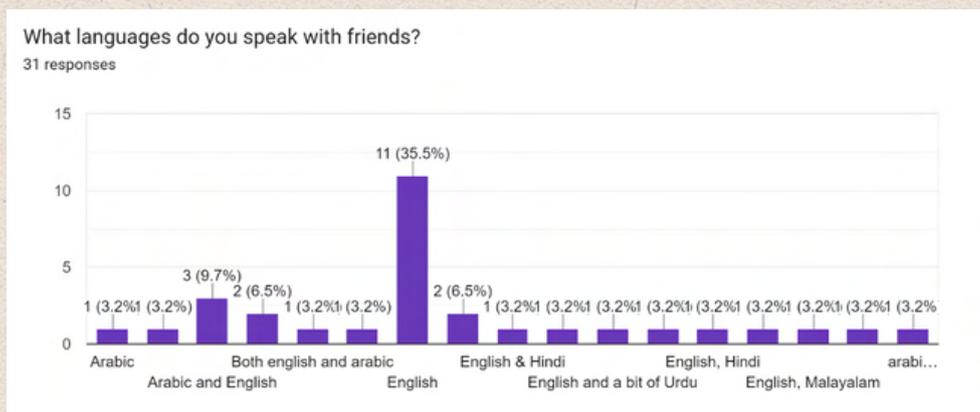


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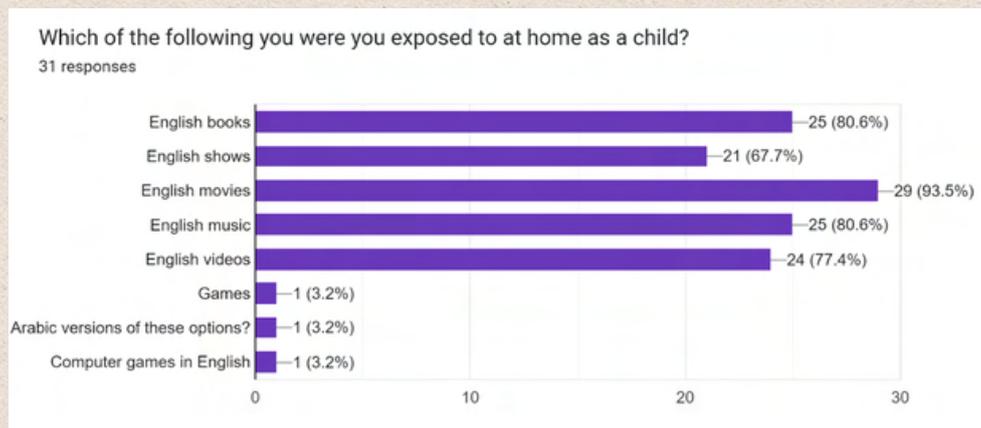


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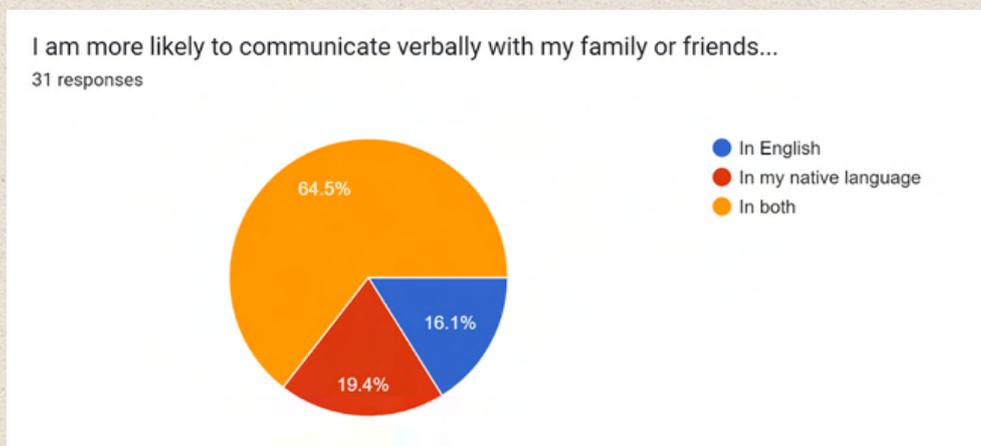


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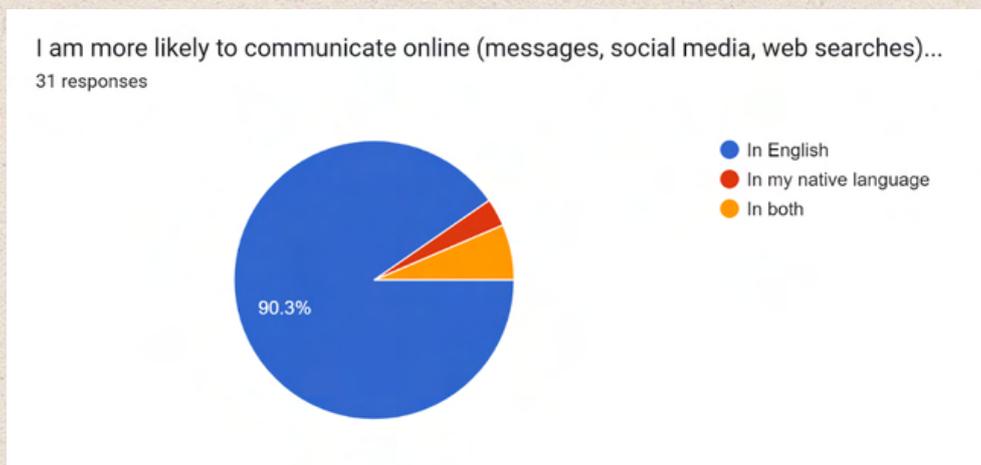


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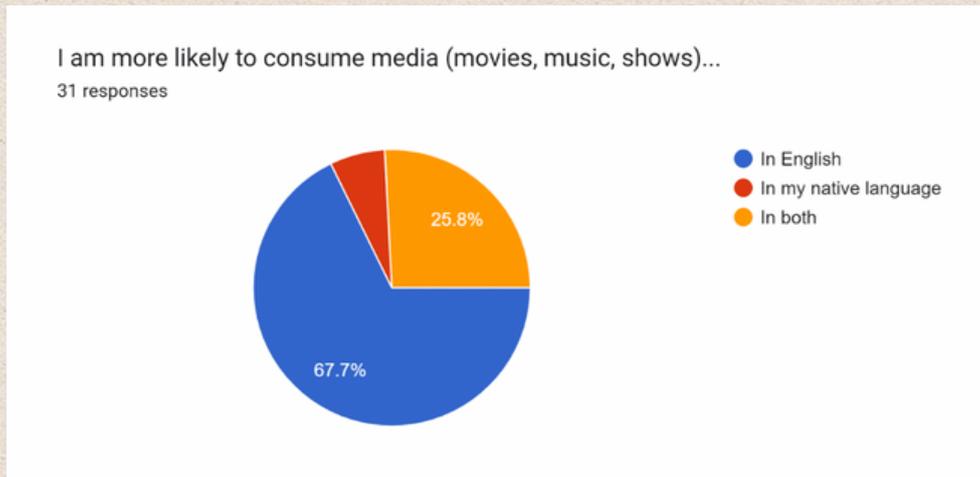


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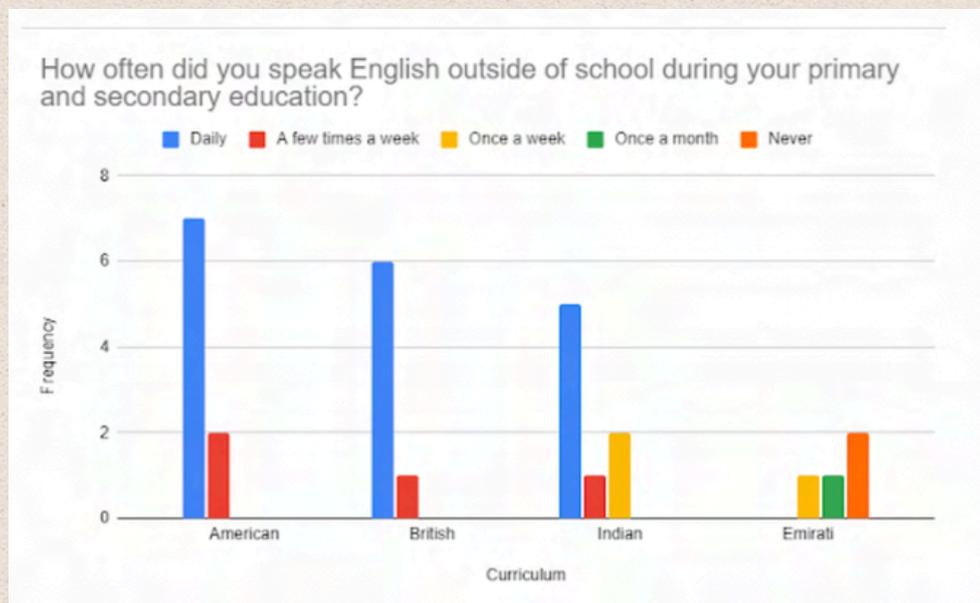


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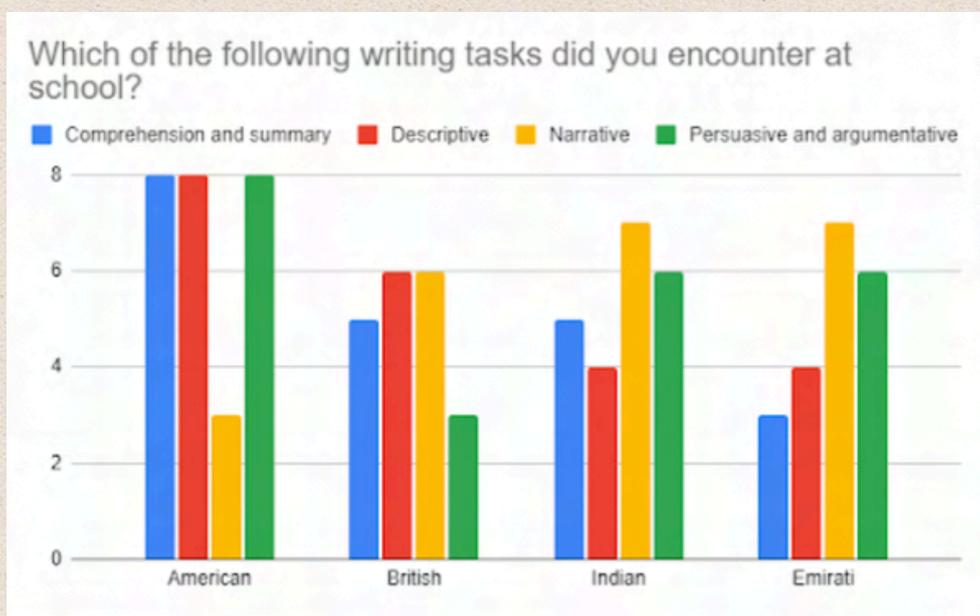


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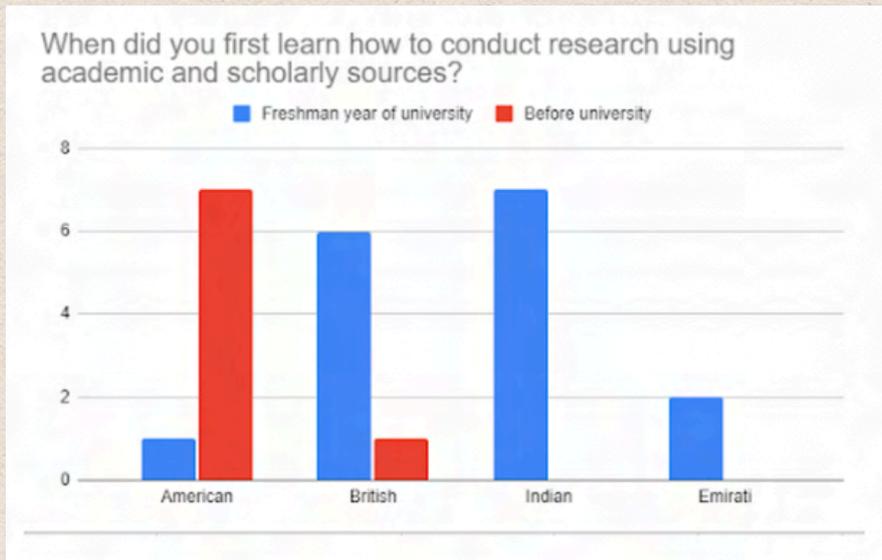


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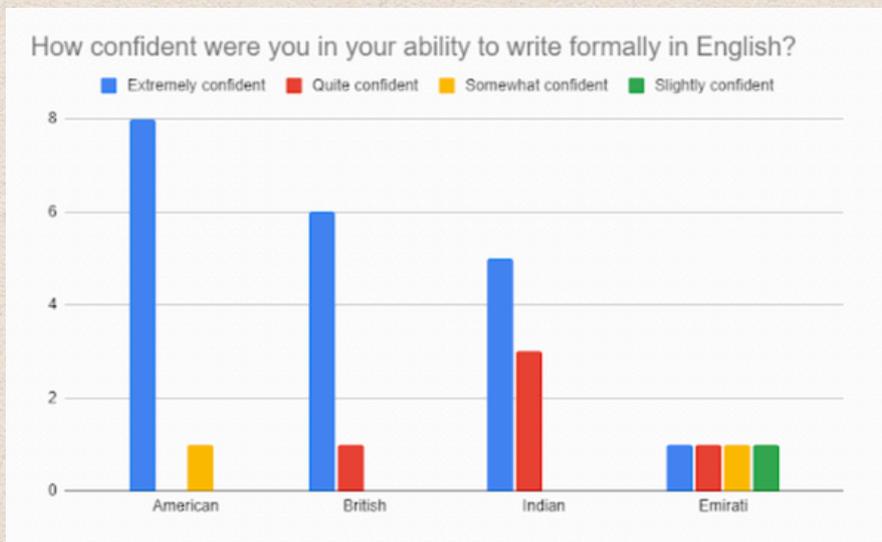


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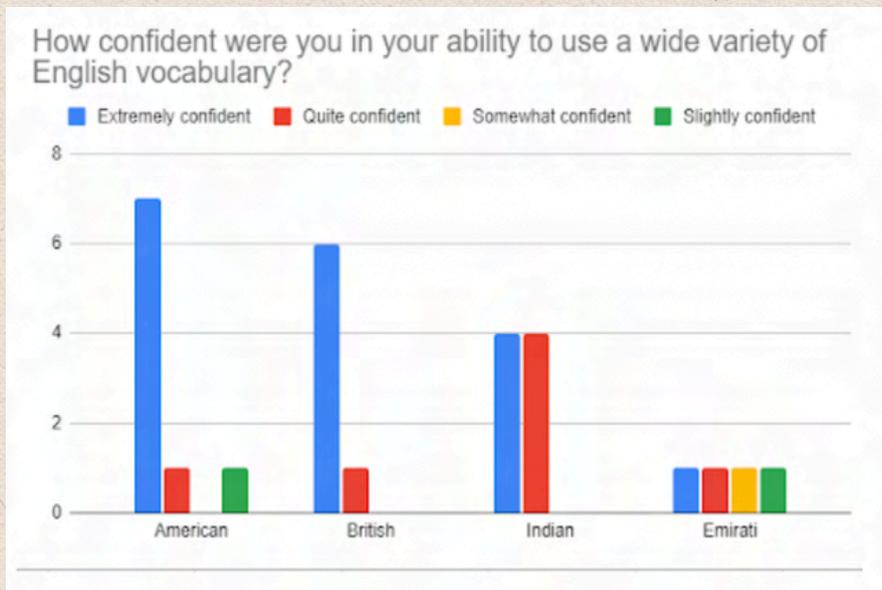


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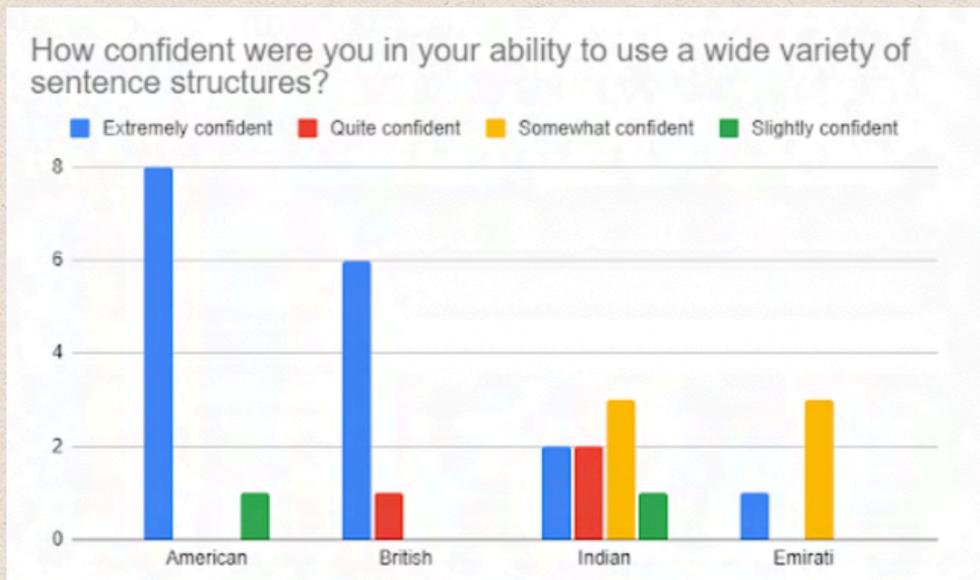


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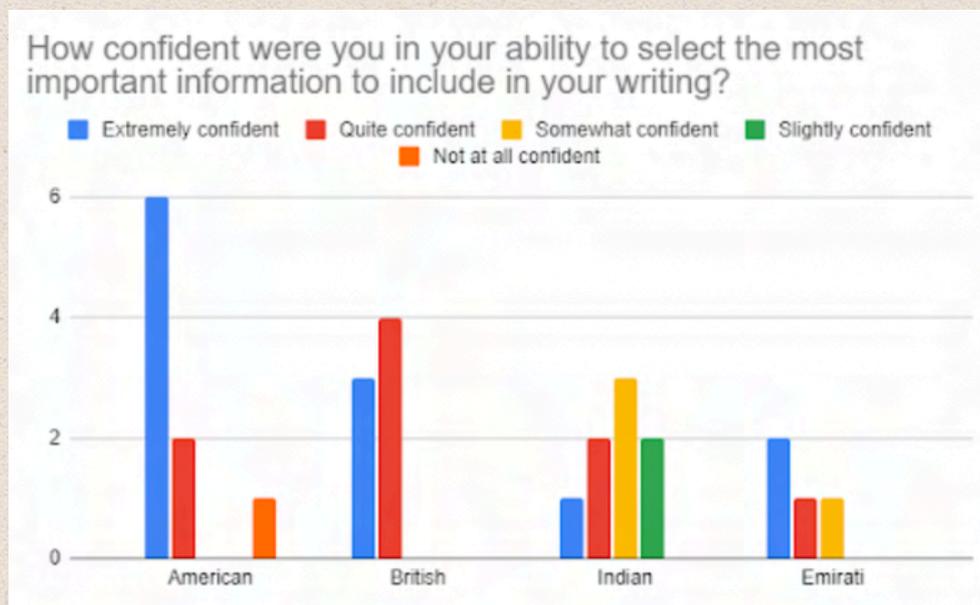


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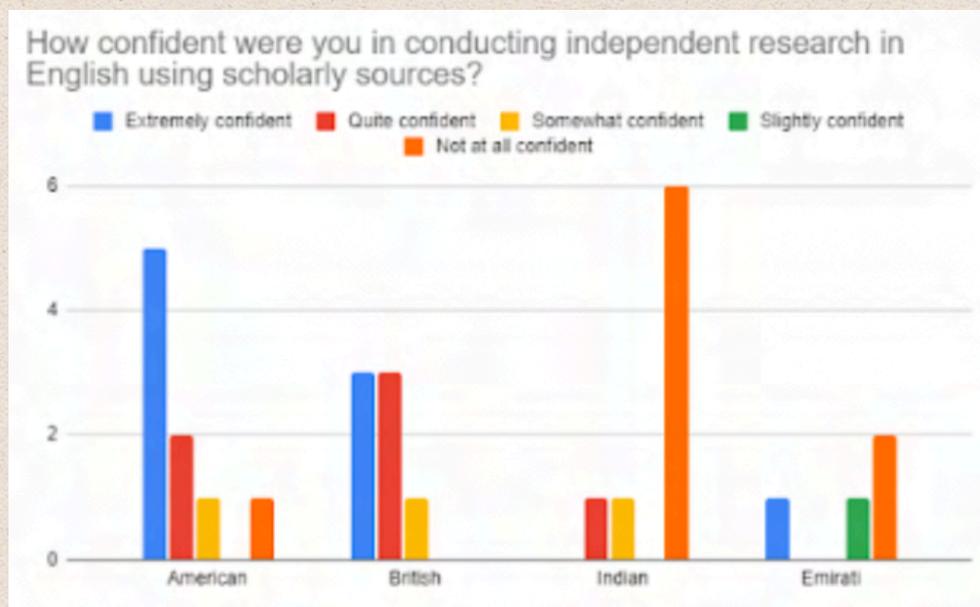


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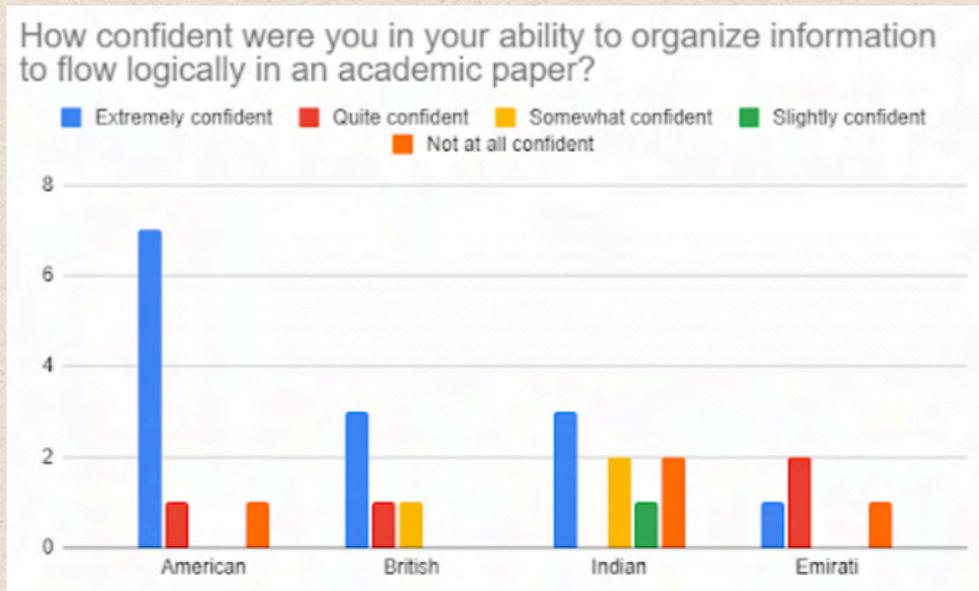


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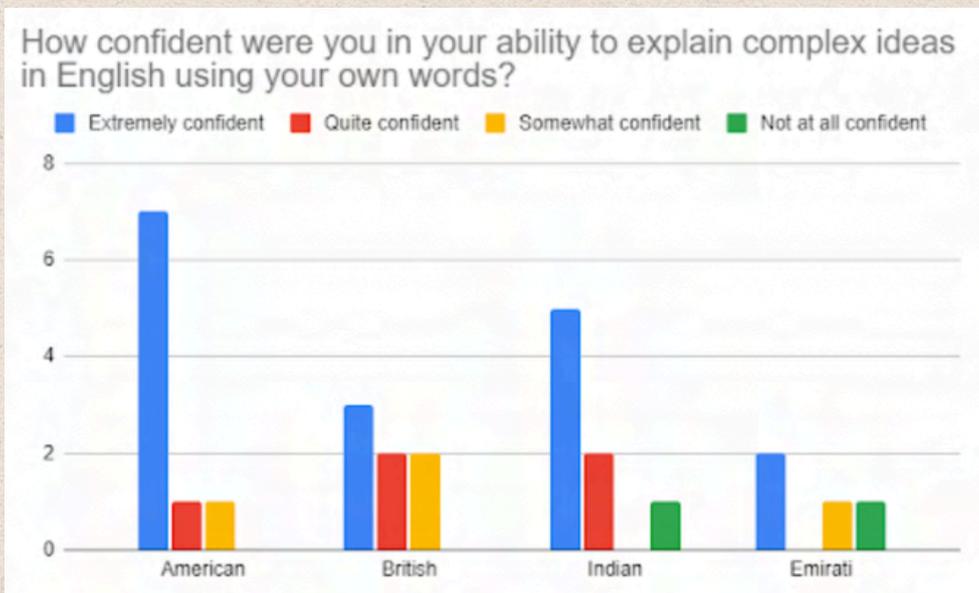


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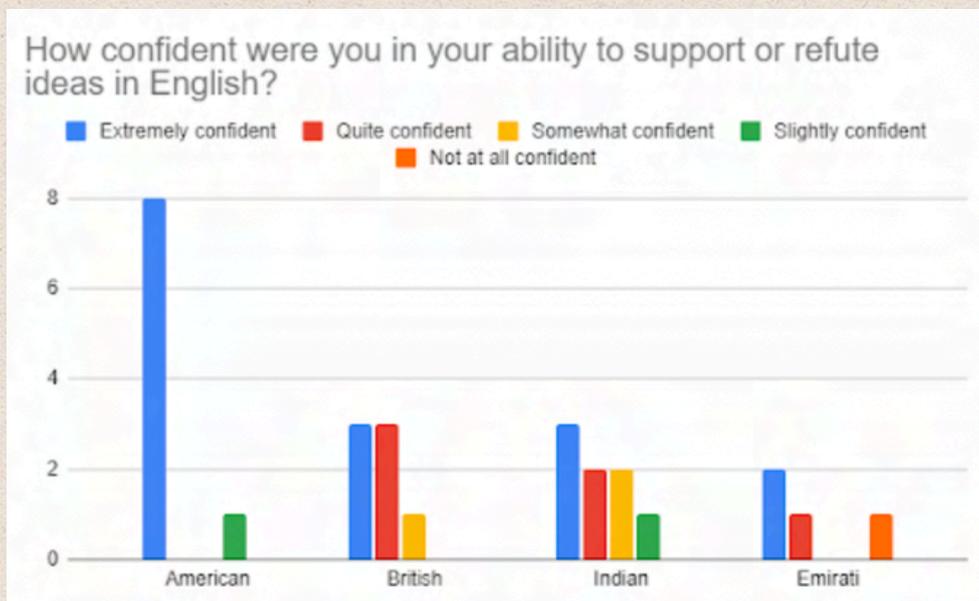
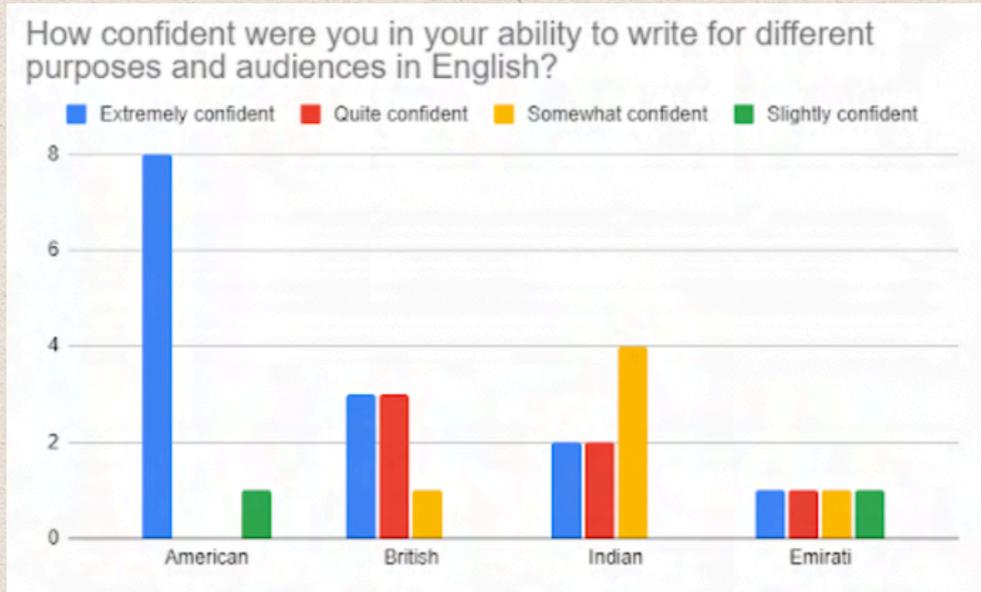


Figure A26



SAME TUTOR, BETTER RESULTS? HOW RETURNING TO THE SAME TUTOR SHAPES WRITING SESSION PRODUCTIVITY AT THE AUS WRITING CENTER

Fahimah Saiyed

Abstract

This research paper explores whether tutees benefit from consistently working with the same tutors and how this affects session productivity and satisfaction. While existing research highlights the advantages of consistency in tutor-tutee pairings, few studies examine this dynamic in multicultural and multilingual university contexts, leaving a gap in the understanding of writing center interactions. To address this, I conducted semi-structured interviews with two tutor-tutee pairs at the American University of Sharjah, focusing on their experiences with consistent pairings. The findings revealed that sessions with consistent pairings were more productive due to the reduced need for repeatedly building rapport. Tutees felt their needs were better addressed, with a preference for directive feedback. Over time, tutees required less guidance, highlighting the efficiency gained through familiarity. While potential drawbacks—such as the risk of imposition of a single tutor’s writing style on a regular tutee—were acknowledged, participants agreed that the benefits of consistency outweighed these concerns. This study contributes to the limited research on writing centers in multicultural and multilingual settings, offering insights into how recurrent tutor-tutee relationships can improve writing support. The findings suggest that writing centers could enhance their services by encouraging consistent pairings, particularly for students from diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds, to better address their unique needs.

Keywords: writing center productivity, multilingual university, writing center practices, tutor-tutee relationships, familiarity in tutoring sessions

Introduction

In any academic institution, writing centers are often seen as crucial support spaces where students can improve their writing skills. These centers are designed not just to provide feedback on written work, but to foster a sense of security and trust, which is essential for effective learning. In fact, for writing centers to truly function as supportive mentoring spaces, they must first be recognized as safe spaces where students feel comfortable exploring and developing their academic skills (Banda, 2019). This foundation of safety and trust is particularly significant when we consider tutor-tutee relationships. When students seek assistance, the quality of their experience can significantly influence their motivation to return and engage in the improvement of their writing skills. For instance, a student may visit the writing center and work with a tutor they have met only once. This session can feel impersonal, focusing primarily on formal exchanges without establishing a deeper connection. On the contrary, a different scenario may involve a student working with a tutor who remembers the student's previous work, strengths, and areas of improvement. The conversation feels more personalized, and they walk out feeling more confident with their writing abilities. Now consider: which scenario is more likely to motivate someone to return and continue improving their writing abilities?

One particular challenge I have observed and experienced as a tutee in the writing center is the need to repeatedly establish rapport and communicate my primary areas of concern. As someone who frequently visits the Writing Center at the American University of Sharjah (AUS), I initially approached different tutors in each session. However, while the feedback was constructive, I noticed that each session required significant time to build rapport, establish what worked for me, and for the tutor to understand my writing style. It was only when I unintentionally worked with the same tutor across multiple sessions that I began to recognize the impact of familiarity on the tutoring process. The tutor quickly became attuned to my writing style and recurring challenges, allowing us to focus more efficiently on refining my drafts. This consistent pairing not only improved the quality of feedback but also enhanced my confidence in the writing process. I was less afraid of being judged and making mistakes. The sessions shifted from the repetitive introduction of myself awkwardly, to fostering a deep understanding of my own writing strategies.

In discussions with peers, I found contrasting views. Some argued that visiting different tutors exposed tutees to different teaching styles and learning approaches. This contrast raised an important question: How does returning to the same tutor affect session productivity and satisfaction at the AUS Writing Center?

While some argue that working with different tutors exposes students to diverse perspectives, others, including myself, find that consistent pairings build trust and facilitate deeper engagement. Understanding this dynamic is not only relevant to improving student outcomes at AUS but can also contribute to broader discussions about effective tutoring practices in writing centers globally. This question becomes especially significant in the context of AUS's student population, which is highly diverse with 84% of students being international (American University of Sharjah, n.d.), and many are non-native English speakers. As such, the Writing Center plays a key role in helping students from various linguistic and educational backgrounds navigate the challenges of academic writing in English. Therefore, this study aims to explore how consistent tutor-tutee pairings influence the productivity and satisfaction of writing center sessions at AUS. I hypothesize that returning to the same tutor fosters a more personalized and productive experience, leading to higher satisfaction levels and improved writing outcomes. This research is particularly useful in the context of AUS, where students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds often rely on the Writing Center to navigate the challenges of academic writing in English.

Literature Review

The relationship between tutor and tutee has been a subject of interest in writing center studies, particularly in understanding how this interaction shapes learning outcomes. Research on consistent tutor-tutee pairings highlights both benefits and complexities. Several studies point to the potential for increased productivity when students consistently work with the same tutor. Silver and VanLehn (2015) introduced the concept of "micro-adaptation," in which tutors adjust their instructional strategies based on prior interactions with the same student. Their findings revealed that tutees who worked with the same tutor across sessions showed greater initial improvement during discussions on specific topics. However, this advantage diminished over time when working on new assignments, as tutors unfamiliar with the tutee eventually became just as effective as those with prior experience.

These findings suggest that while familiarity between tutor and tutee can enhance early session productivity, its long-term impact on learning outcomes may be limited. In my research, I will explore whether this increase in productivity, in fact, decreases with new assignments, as suggested by the authors. It is possible, however, that consistent tutor-tutee pairings continue to offer benefits beyond early sessions, especially when tutors develop familiarity not only with a student's writing style but also with their learning preferences, native language challenges, and recurring issues. Such deeper understanding may enable tutors to provide more personalized support even as assignment topics shift. Additionally, Silver and VanLehn's study may be limited by focusing primarily on early-session productivity, potentially overlooking how familiarity could influence other important outcomes like confidence, motivation, or long-term writing development. My study aims to address these gaps by examining productivity and satisfaction across varied assignments and exploring the refined ways tutor consistency may affect learning over time.

While Silver and VanLehn focused on productivity, other researchers have explored how familiarity affects student engagement and communication, especially among multilingual students. For instance, Okudo and Anderson (2018) examined how consistent tutor-tutee pairings affect communication and comfort levels in tutoring sessions, particularly among Chinese students in U.S. universities. Their research found that when tutees repeatedly worked with the same tutor, they were more likely to open up, ask questions, and engage deeply with the material. This was especially true for Chinese ESL students, who often faced anxiety about their language skills and felt more at ease when paired with a familiar tutor. This openness can be especially valuable, as asking questions allows tutors and students to identify knowledge gaps and check each other's understanding. According to Thompson and Mackiewicz (2014), such interactions help tutors, and occasionally students, facilitate the dialogue of writing center sessions, ultimately supporting students' engagement and long-term development as writers. Interestingly, the benefits of tutor familiarity in this case go beyond just increased comfort, but also led to more specific and targeted feedback, as opposed to the general advice often given in single-session appointments. The authors report that students often encounter tutors who provide only general advice, which may not address specific writing needs, particularly on surface-level issues like grammar.

This complements Silver and VanLehn's findings by suggesting that familiarity improves not only efficiency but also depth of interaction. This insight supports my focus on how consistent tutor-tutee pairings impact productivity and satisfaction, including how familiarity might shape the feedback process to better meet the needs of multilingual students.

Further building on the theme of feedback, Madaio et al. (2017) investigated how tutors navigate the balance between maintaining politeness and delivering constructive feedback. They found that tutors who lacked rapport with their tutees often used more indirect instructions to avoid threatening the tutee's "positive face," that is, their desire to be respected and not embarrassed (p. 1). This often meant offering suggestions rather than corrections, phrasing feedback as questions, or avoiding direct criticism. Such approaches are generally less directive and may focus more on explanation than editing, though they are not always tailored to the tutee's specific needs. While this strategy worked well with new tutees, enabling them to assess and solve more problems, it was less effective among familiar pairs, where direct feedback proved more beneficial. These findings align with Okudo and Anderson's observation that familiarity allows tutors to shift towards more tailored guidance. In my research, I will inquire from tutors about their preferences for using either direct or indirect feedback in their sessions to understand how feedback strategies evolve with familiarity.

While research on rapport and feedback strategies exists in the context of writing centers, there is limited literature on the experience of multilingual writers visiting the writing center, especially in a Gulf-based context. Tiruchittampalam et al. (2018) addressed part of this gap by focusing on how one-on-one consultations at an English-medium university in the Gulf region impacted the writing skills of L1 Arabic students. Drawing on Vygotsky's theory, they emphasized how learning occurs in stages through interaction with a more knowledgeable person. Initially, the learner relies on external input, which is gradually internalized. In this context, it is suggested that the one-on-one and staged nature of writing center sessions supports this type of learning (Nordlof, 2014, as cited in Tiruchittampalam et al., 2018), where knowledge is constructed gradually through interaction.

Meeting the same tutor across multiple sessions may reinforce this process, as tutees can build on previous feedback, develop trust, and internalize small pieces of guidance over time. In contrast, working with a different tutor each time may disrupt this progression, requiring the tutee to repeatedly adjust to new communication styles and starting points, potentially slowing their ability to retain and apply feedback. This study is important to my research because, although the authors explored the development of Arabic speakers in the cultural context of the Gulf region, they do not address whether students consistently worked with the same tutor, which is a critical aspect of understanding the long-term impact of tutor-tutee relationships in writing center settings.

Overall, while studies have explored different themes in writing center research, such as learning outcomes, tutor-tutee rapport, and feedback strategies, none have addressed the intersection of these themes within a multicultural and multilingual context. The unique setting of the AUS Writing Center offers an opportunity to explore how consistent tutor-tutee pairings impact both productivity and satisfaction in a diverse student population. Thus, this study will fill a significant gap in the literature by examining how these interactions affect learning outcomes and the preferences of multilingual students in a culturally diverse environment.

Methodology

Participants

To explore the impact of consistent tutor-tutee pairings on productivity, I conducted interviews with two tutors and their respective regular tutees from the Writing Center at the American University of Sharjah (AUS). To protect the privacy of the participants, I have used alias names: Tutor 1 is referred to as Maryam Amin and her tutee as Essa Aziz; Tutor 2 as Amina Baz, and her tutee as Habiba Cham. These alias names are used consistently throughout the research. All four participants were interviewed separately on different days in person, with one tutee interviewed online. Semi-structured interviews were used for both tutors and the tutees, allowing flexibility for follow-up questions when needed (see Appendix A for the tutor interview questions and Appendix B for the tutee interview questions). Each interview lasted approximately 15–25 minutes. Both tutors had nearly two years of tutoring experience, making them well-acquainted with the tutoring process.

Maryam considers Arabic her first language, while Amina considers herself an English and Turkish native bilingual and has working proficiency in Arabic. Both tutors completed their schooling in the American system. The tutees were both Sophomore engineering majors. Essa, having predominantly studied in Canada before completing high school in the UAE within the American system, finds himself equally fluent in Arabic and English. Habiba, while considering Arabic her first language, is also equally comfortable with English due to her educational background in both the British and American school systems. All four of the participants are multilingual and multicultural, proficient in Arabic and English.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, I voice-recorded all the interviews and transcribed them using the “TurboScribe” website. To identify key themes, I uploaded the transcriptions to the “Insight7” platform. I analyzed the tutors’ and tutees’ transcriptions separately, looking for recurring patterns and themes. Additionally, I created a table on Google Docs to organize these themes (see Appendix C), with specific quotes from the interviews included beside each theme for clarity. Moreover, to ensure thoroughness, I reviewed each transcription multiple times, manually adding any additional information or themes that may have been overlooked during the initial analysis. This process helped maintain the accuracy and depth of the findings.

Results and Discussion

Increased Productivity in Sessions: Understanding Needs & Expectations

A prominent theme that emerged from the interviews was the increase in efficiency in sessions when tutees worked consistently with the same tutor. Participants shared that this consistency eliminated the need for repeated explanations of assignments, saving time and allowing for more focused discussions on writing issues. H. Cham explained, “It saves time as she [her tutor] already knows what I am looking for, even if I don't mention it” (personal communication, November 20, 2024). This familiarity meant that both the tutor and tutee could begin sessions with a clear understanding of what needed to be addressed without spending time revising background details. This contradicts the findings of Silver and VanLehn (2015), as productivity does not necessarily decrease with new tasks in consistent pairings; tutors, having a deeper understanding of their tutees’ working styles and expectations, irrespective of the tasks, can adapt seamlessly to different writing challenges.

Moreover, E. Aziz compared working with the same tutor to having an ongoing conversation, stating, “It’s more like a follow-up when I go to the same tutor” (personal communication, November 21, 2024). This sense of continuity allowed him to build on progress from previous sessions rather than starting anew, which he found particularly helpful for longer assignments or recurring issues, aligning with the findings from Thonus (2001), who noted that tutees consistently working with the same tutor over multiple sessions tend to make more significant progress in their learning and skill development.

Furthermore, tutors also emphasized how familiarity with previous sessions made the sessions pass more easily and quickly. A. Baz shared her perspective: “After we catch up with each other for five to ten minutes, it takes us 15-20 minutes max to go over the tutee’s needs” (personal communication, November 19, 2024). She attributed this efficiency to her familiarity with the tutee’s strengths, weaknesses, and goals from past sessions, which allowed her to provide tailored support more quickly. The time saved was especially valuable in shorter sessions as it ensured that the focus remained on addressing the tutee’s concerns. Another significant benefit of regular pairings was the tutor’s ability to understand and adapt to the expectations of professors. M. Amin described how working with consistent tutees gave her insights into their professors’ preferences. She explained, “When I read the paper, I would know, ‘Oh, your professor is not going to like that.’ Knowing what this professor is like and continuously getting updates helped him [her tutee] improve his paper” (personal communication, November 12, 2024). This understanding allowed her to guide tutees more effectively, particularly when dealing with challenging or demanding professors who have specific needs. Both tutees agreed, emphasizing how the tutor’s understanding of their professor’s expectations saved them significant time and effort. This eliminated the need to explain these preferences to new tutors, ultimately enhancing the productivity of their sessions.

When asked if there were any challenges to working with new tutors, Habiba reported that when she had to explain her assignment to a new tutor, half the session would be spent providing context. She also mentioned feeling that the new tutors often misunderstood her concerns, making the progress less effective. “Sometimes, they don’t really get what I’m looking for,” she said, emphasizing the frustration of having to repeatedly clarify her needs.

Essa echoed this sentiment, explaining that sessions with unfamiliar tutors felt slower and less productive because of the time required to build rapport. Therefore, the consistent pairing of tutors and tutees enhanced session productivity by building familiarity, improving communication, and allowing both parties to focus on meaningful progress without going over basic information repeatedly.

Tailored Feedback: Balancing Criticism & Directness

Another key takeaway from the interviews was the role of feedback in shaping the tutor-tutee interactions. Both tutors and tutees highlighted that working together regularly allowed tutors to better understand the personalities and preferences of their tutees, leading to more personalized feedback. M. Amin explained that regular sessions helped her adjust her feedback to suit the tutee's needs. "Sometimes there are things you know would help them more than another," she noted, highlighting how familiarity guided her approach (personal communication, November 12, 2024). On the other hand, A. Baz reflected on the challenges of working with new tutees, sharing that she was cautious about being too critical at the start: "I fear I might say something that scares them, and they never come back to the Writing Center," (personal communication, November 19, 2024), she says, aligning with the findings of Madaio et al. (2017). However, with regular tutees, Amina felt more confident knowing their boundaries and understanding "when to push and when not to push." This shows how consistent sessions help tutors understand when to challenge tutees and when to offer support, ensuring feedback is both effective and considerate.

In line with this, regular sessions also made tutees more comfortable with directive feedback. For instance, E. Aziz appreciated the straightforwardness, describing his tutor as someone who "is blunt when she needs to be and nice when she could be" (personal communication, November 21, 2024). He felt this balance made the feedback genuine and constructive, which suggests that the tutoring session consists of a balance between directive and nondirective forms of feedback. H. Cham added that when tutors are hesitant to point out issues, it can feel like they are making the tutee do all the work, which she found demotivating from the tutor's side (personal communication, November 20, 2024).

This mirrors the findings of Brown and Levinson (1987), who discovered that tutees who had familiar relationships with their tutors were more likely to receive direct feedback, as the comfort level between them reduced the fear of causing offense (as cited in Madaio et al., 2017). Similarly, Nordoff (2014) notes that tutors often shift toward more direct forms of feedback when they have established rapport with the tutee, viewing this as a more responsive and individualized form of feedback. Therefore, from the tutor's perspective, the ability to tailor criticism was a significant aspect of their feedback strategy.

Moreover, Maryam shared that while her overall tutoring approach remained constant, her level of criticism depended on the tutee. “Some tutees want the rough criticism; they’re like, “Tell me what is wrong,” she said. At the same time, she understood that some tutees required a gentler approach. Similarly, Amina explained that avoiding being non-directive for a tutee who preferred it would feel “odd,” highlighting the importance of knowing the individual’s preferences. This personalized approach not only strengthened the tutor-tutee relationship but also made the sessions more productive by striking a balance between constructive feedback and encouragement. Such adaptability also reflects broader cultural considerations in tutoring. As Tan (2011) observed, a less directive style of tutoring was more challenging to apply in an Asian context, where a more direct, teacher-like approach better suited cultural expectations—a finding echoed by Okudo and Anderson (2018). This underscores the importance of cultural awareness in effective tutoring.

These subtleties are rarely apparent in single sessions, and they emerge only through regular tutor-tutee pairings, where sustained interactions let tutors attune to a student’s linguistic background, cultural expectations, and feedback comfort zone. By recognizing and responding to these finer cues, tutors can promote a learning environment that not only meets students’ specific needs but also heightens their motivation and willingness to engage.

Increased Comfort Level: Engagement and Guidance

Building on the importance of understanding individual preferences, tutors shared that new tutees tend to be more rigid and often hesitate when asking questions, creating a barrier to open communication. They observed that this hesitation can affect the flow of the session, making it more challenging to address the tutee’s needs.

On the contrary, H. Cham stated that she would have no issue voicing her concerns, whether with a regular tutor or a new one, as it did not matter to her (personal communication, November 20, 2024). Similarly, E. Aziz expressed that he would freely admit when he was struggling, regardless of whether he was working with a new or regular tutor. However, he did admit that he would feel more comfortable voicing his struggles with English with someone from the same cultural background as his (personal communication, November 21, 2024). This implies that cultural similarity could play a significant role in enhancing comfort and openness during writing center sessions.

The discussion of comfort and openness naturally extends to how the relationship between tutors and tutees evolves over time. As familiarity develops, the need for constant guidance decreases, and the sessions become more engaging, as A. Baz shares that tutees are “aware of what they need, and they know what they want me to pinpoint, so it is like very quick, quick, quick” (personal communication, November 19, 2024). M. Amin explained that she could easily identify if a tutee had used AI-generated content after working with them regularly, as she became familiar with their writing style (personal communication, November 12, 2024). Further, Amina noted that with regular tutees, the barrier of initial hesitation is often broken early on, making the sessions more comfortable and productive. The tutees also expressed how the sessions were more fun with a tutor they regularly visited, which motivated them to visit the writing center often. Hence, the familiarity between the tutor and the tutee leads to more open communication, allowing the tutor to offer more efficient and focused guidance. This development of rapport supports deeper student engagement in the writing process, which is crucial since learning occurs not just in producing writing but through actively discovering and engaging with the writing process itself (Sullivan and Cleary, 2014).

Preference for Consistent Tutors Over Varied Perspectives

When asked if the tutees could benefit from seeing different tutors in any way, all four participants expressed a preference for working consistently with the same tutor. M. Amin, for instance, highlighted that writing is subjective and that constantly switching tutors could cause confusion for the tutee, potentially doing more harm than good.

She shared a recent example where one of her regular tutees approached another tutor, who suggested a specific structure. However, when the tutee returned to Maryam, she recommended a different approach. The tutee then pointed out that he had already worked with another tutor on an alternative structure, which led to confusion (personal communication, November 12, 2024). Maryam clarified that she was not suggesting that the tutor was wrong but noted that such inconsistencies could confuse the tutee, making it harder for them to improve their writing abilities effectively. She went on to mention that, if time permits, a tutee could approach another tutor for an overview of the paper, but for the most part, consistency in tutoring is beneficial, which mirrored A. Baz's opinion as well (personal communication, November 19, 2024). Similarly, E. Aziz shared strong feelings about his experience with new tutors, recalling, "I would rather not have wasted my 30 minutes." He explained that he did not find the session helpful and felt that the feedback he received was not constructive, as it was mainly generalized praise (personal communication, November 21, 2024). Essa compared this to the more personalized feedback he typically received from his regular tutor. Moreover, both tutees agreed that the benefits of working with a new tutor never outweighed the benefit of consistency. While they acknowledged that a fresh perspective "might" occasionally be useful, they both agreed that the "fresh set of eyes" was the only potential advantage. This reflects a broader sentiment among the participants that familiarity with a tutor's approach leads to more meaningful and effective sessions, as it allows for tailored feedback and a deeper understanding of the tutee's needs.

Despite the benefits, both tutors and tutees face a challenge—the increased comfort during regular sessions sometimes leads to lengthy conversations, making it difficult for tutors to steer the focus back to writing. Further, Amina expressed that she worries that she might be imposing her own writing style on her tutees. However, when I asked her tutee about this, the tutee disagreed, explaining that she does not simply follow instructions but carefully considers her tutor's suggestions (H. Cham, personal communication, November 20, 2024). This aligns with Nordoff's (2014) finding that the interaction between student and tutor often resembles a give-and-take conversation, where both parties contribute to the learning progress.

Similarly, Eleftheriou (2019) observed that while tutees generally preferred tutors who appeared confident, knowledgeable, and authoritative, they also valued maintaining some degree of autonomy in guiding the direction of the session. These challenges, balancing authority with autonomy and managing prolonged conversations, did not seem to diminish the overall effectiveness of the sessions, as tutors expressed adapting their approaches to ensure writing concerns were addressed effectively and prioritized.

Conclusion

My study explored whether consistent tutor-tutee pairings impact session productivity and satisfaction, particularly within the multicultural and multilingual context of the American University of Sharjah (AUS). The findings indicate that tutors and tutees strongly prefer consistent pairings, as they enhance productivity, increase motivation, and promote a deeper understanding of individual needs. Over time, tutors became more attuned to their tutees' expectations, and the increased comfort level contributes to a more effective and supportive learning environment. These results suggest that writing centers could leverage consistent pairings to encourage students to seek help more regularly, ultimately improving the quality of their writing and learning experiences. However, the study also identified a challenge: the difficulty in refocusing conversations on writing due to the comfort and familiarity that develop in regular sessions. Despite this, all participants agreed that the benefits of consistent pairings outweighed the drawbacks.

Implementations for Practice

To implement the findings, writing centers could develop a system that allows students to request or maintain long-term tutor pairings. This could be facilitated through an initial consultation or an online survey that collects basic preferences from tutees. In this survey, tutees could provide details about their academic background, including the curriculum they come from. Moreover, understanding the educational background the tutee is familiar with can offer valuable context for tutors. For example, knowing whether a tutee has been accustomed to writing in a more rigid, structured format or a more flexible, creative style can help the tutor better tailor their feedback and provide more effective guidance on transitioning to the university's writing standards.

Further, when tutees have the option to work with a tutor from the same academic background as theirs, it can provide a sense of comfort, and their needs can be better understood by the tutors.

To make the process more engaging for both tutors and tutees, writing centers could introduce a collaborative session log system. At the end of each session, tutors and tutees could spend a few minutes jointly filling out a digital or physical session summary. The summary could include key points discussed, aspects of writing addressed, progress made, and goals for the next session. Such a system would actively involve tutees in reflecting on their learning, making them more invested in their progress. Additionally, a feature like personalized reminders for the next session, based on the goals set, could help tutees stay focused and motivated. This approach not only enhances documentation but also strengthens the partnership between tutor and tutee, making the process more interactive and tutee-centered.

Limitations and Future Research

The study has several limitations. The restricted sample size reduces the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the reliance on interviews may have introduced bias, as the tone and phrasing of the questions could have influenced participants' responses. While the findings address a gap in existing research by examining tutor-tutee interactions in a multilingual and multicultural university setting, a significant limitation was that the sample primarily consisted of students from British or American educational backgrounds, who were already comfortable with English and writing. Based on preliminary evidence and my personal experience, students from more diverse linguistic backgrounds, particularly those who do not consider English their first language, may face unique challenges in writing when transitioning to university. They may struggle with language barriers, academic expectations, and voicing concerns in writing sessions that are understood correctly. I hypothesize that for these students, repeated tutor-tutee pairings could be especially important, as ongoing interaction with the same tutor might promote greater understanding of their specific linguistic and cultural needs, leading to more personalized feedback and increased comfort in communication.

Conversely, working with different tutors each time could impede progress by requiring students to repeatedly explain their challenges. Future research should explore these dynamics by including tutors and tutees from a broader range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, it would be valuable to investigate whether consistent pairings with tutors from similar cultural or linguistic contexts could help address these challenges. For instance, during the interview, Essa shared that he would feel more comfortable expressing concerns to someone from the same cultural background, suggesting that shared experiences could enhance communication and support. Therefore, we can better understand how writing centers can create inclusive environments that cater to the needs of all students by studying these factors.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Tutors

Introductory

1. How long has the tutee been seeing you? When did they first come in, and for what courses?

Productivity

2. In your experience, how does working regularly with the same tutee compare to working with new tutees in terms of progress/productivity made in sessions?

3. Are there any specific examples or patterns you've observed?

4. What indicators do you typically use to assess productivity?

5. Have you noticed any changes in these indicators (eg.: more engaged, requiring less guidance, etc.) when working with the same tutee over multiple sessions?

Familiarity and Feedback Strategies

6. How does familiarity with a consistent tutee influence the rapport or comfort level in sessions, if any, as opposed to with a new tutee?

7. How does familiarity affect your approach to communication and feedback with a tutee?

8. Are there any notable differences between a regular and a non-regular? 9. From your perspective, does a consistent pairing impact the ease with which tutees express questions or concerns/their engagement levels?

10. How does your familiarity with a tutee's language background/curriculum affect your approach to tutoring, if at all?

11. Are there any particular challenges or benefits?

12. In what ways (how) does having multiple sessions with a student help you understand their English skills and adjust your teaching approach to support them better? 13. If at all (have you changed your approach, or what have you done exactly) for your regular tutees?

14. Do you think you can provide better feedback if a tutee sees you multiple times for the same assignment, and that it helps them? (Does it help you better understand their needs?)

Potential Drawbacks

15. Are there any challenges you've experienced when working consistently with the same tutee?

16. Does familiarity help, or does it sometimes create a comfort zone that may hinder progress?

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Tutees

Learning Progress and Productivity

1. How would you describe the impact of working with the same tutor on your learning progress?
2. Do you feel more productive in sessions with a familiar tutor?
3. Do you notice a difference in learning when working with a new tutor? (understanding of the material)?
4. In what ways might having multiple sessions with the same tutor on one assignment affect your comfort level with the task?
5. Do you feel your understanding of the task improves each time?
6. Do you see a change in feedback with the tutor over time?

Comfort Levels and Communication

7. How comfortable do you feel in communicating with your regular tutor? 8. Do you find it easier to ask questions or express confusion compared to when you work with new tutors?
9. Do you feel more comfortable making mistakes in front of the same tutor across multiple sessions?
10. Does having the same tutor impact your motivation to attend sessions regularly? If so, how?

Language and Cultural Comfort

11. Are there specific challenges you feel were easier to address because (if) your tutor understands your language and cultural background?

Potential Drawbacks

12. Do you feel that there are any downsides to working consistently with the same tutor, such as becoming too reliant or comfortable?
13. In your opinion, are there any areas where you might benefit from a different perspective by working with new tutors occasionally?
14. If you were given the option, would you prefer to work with the same tutor for future sessions, or would you be open to trying new tutors? Why?

Appendix C Thematic Organization Table of Quotes from Participants

Theme	Maryam	Amina	Habiba	Essa
<p>The familiarity with regular tutees leads to quicker sessions as both parties are aware of each other's needs and expectations</p> <p>(productivity)</p> <p>&</p> <p>Professor's expectations</p>	<p>In terms of the work, it's faster. It's easier for us to communicate. So, increased comfort level. Exactly. So, rapid discussions, rapid improvements in the paper, changes, completion rates</p> <p>So it's easier for her to imagine what the professor would want. But your professor's not going to like that. And the student's response would always be like, oh, you finally cracked his code. Now you know how he thinks.</p> <p>I have to take a good few minutes from the session trying to understand what they worked on in the previous session [for new tutors].</p>	<p>For productivity, it has a huge impact, we'll debrief each other on like what she did, whatever, whatever, or like we'll just talk about general stuff for like five minutes, and then it takes us like 15-20 minutes max to go over her needs, and because I know what she wants, and she comes in with like a very specific thing, most of the time it's like a very quick session with her and</p> <p>productivity for me is if we're able to get done with the main thing that they had in mind</p>	<p>Saves time because she already knows what I'm looking to fix, even like if I don't mention it.</p> <p>Although I mentioned my concerns, it was not addressed as well. Like they didn't exactly understand what I'm looking for. Okay. And I feel like it's like a learning process together. Like she starts to learn what I want, I start to learn how she expects, how she writes, whether it fits me, doesn't fit me, what I want to say. And it kind of makes the meeting more fun. It's not like just a boring, go through the right thing, how do you think, what do you think kind of thing.....</p>	<p>If I go to a tutor for the same paper, they already know, I don't have to go through every single session explaining what this paper is about. Okay. So it's just like a follow-up. If I go to a brand new tutor, I have to explain to them from scratch, okay, it's all of this, I'm doing this, I'm doing that. That takes like half of a session. By the time she or he starts reading my paper, half the session is gone.</p>

			Honestly, yes, because not only like she, I mentioned like she understands what I want, but she also kind of starts to understand what the professor themselves want	
<p>Understand their boundaries regarding criticism, leading to a more tailored and effective teaching approach.</p> <p>Feedback changes</p>	<p>Tutee's personality, there are sometimes things that you can say or do that you know would help them more than another</p> <p>They're like, tell me what's wrong. Yeah. Like, tell it to me in the harshest way possible. Like, okay, this paragraph is not great.</p> <p>Because you know how sensitive or insensitive they are. You're more careful with new tutors. Exactly. And I am definitely more careful with new tutors because you don't know wha</p>	<p>If I say something, and then they're like, like, they get so scared that they never come back to the writing center, you know, which is possible. But with a regular, I always know their boundaries more. So I always know where to push and where to not push. So where I can criticize them, where I cannot criticize them. So I kind of know their general vibe</p>	<p>sometimes the tutors are, like, not motivated themselves. Okay. And they try to make you do most of the work. You read it. You go through it. You tell me what you think. And there's little to no effort from their side....</p>	<p>She is straightforward, she doesn't have to do all the hidden nice comments. She could be blunt when she needs to be blunt, she could be nice when she could be nice</p>
Perspective on	Writing is		I mean, maybe a	

<p>seeing different tutors</p>	<p>subjective. Yeah. So sometimes that could cause a bit of an issue. It could get the tutee a bit confused.</p> <p>Because recently, for instance, when he was structuring the paper, I had a particular structure in mind. Another tutee had another structure in mind. And he had gone to both of us.</p> <p>And before he came to my session, he went to her.</p> <p>And they worked on a particular structure. And when he came to me, I thought it was his structure. I was like, I recommend that you do this. He was like, but I did it with another tutor. So now you get worried that... I'm not trying to say that the other tutor is wrong. You get me? So that is one issue, definitely.</p> <p>And the other one is that, well... I don't know. Time. How</p>		<p>fresh set of eyes</p>	<p>I rather would have not wasted my 30 minutes going to the tutor, so they didn't really help me at all. Yeah. But if I go to tutor that first time I went to, I know they helped me, I'll just go back to them, back to them. So I don't take the risk of going to a tutor who did not help me, because that's happened before.</p> <p>.....</p>
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	<p>much time do you have to... If you have enough time, it could maybe work out for you to just get a general overview of the paper.</p> <p>Sure, why not? Because sometimes, again, he has come to me so many times, maybe even I'm disregarding a couple of things here and there</p> <p>You could write the paper, and then go in at the end, with one particular tutor, and then go in at the end and have someone else take a look and see what they think.</p>			
Comfort level	<p>And I know that he's a very intelligent, hard-working student. And when he ended up with this professor, he kind of put his GPA at risk. So he started getting worried. And he needed any place, anywhere that could</p>	<p>But I call her my regular because we became really close, like we bonded in the sessions, so she would book all, like most of my sessions,</p> <p>When it's a new tutee, a lot of the</p>	<p>Personally, I feel like I would disagree and voice my disagreement either way. Okay. Doesn't really matter</p>	<p>Just tell her up front, or tell him up front. Even if it's not a regular tutor? Yeah. You tell them, okay. I tell them up front. I mean, I'll be like, I'm struggling with this, pleas</p>

	<p>give him some sort of assistance or some sort of comfort, as you said. And so he came to the Writing Center. He came to me because he knows me. And he's like, help. I need someone to help. Literally a call for help.</p>	<p>time, there's a barrier that they're hesitant to ask something, es, they're always so rigid about</p>		
<p>More engaged, less guidance</p>	<p>Whenever they come see me about their papers, first of all, our dynamic in the session is much different. Okay. There's no ice whatsoever. Awkward silence</p> <p>You don't really have to give them a lot of comments. They understand you. Okay. Even they understand</p>	<p>I am more engaged with my regulars, because most of the time, again, we don't need to like, we don't need to break that barrier</p> <p>They're aware of what they need. Yes. And they know what they want me to pinpoint, yo</p>		
<p>Feedback approaches of tutors</p>	<p>I generally don't really change the way that I teach. I have a consistent base.</p> <p>Like for instance, some tutees like to get that rough criticism. Yeah.</p>	<p>I am okay criticizing them, because I know that they wouldn't take it. Personally, I'm always scared with a new tutee, if I say something, and then they're like, like, they get so scared</p>		

	<p>They're like, tell me what's wrong. Yeah. Like, tell it to me in the harshest way possible. Like, okay, this paragraph is not great. But in other tutees, I know they're very sensitive. So, I would change the way that I mention this</p>	<p>that they never come back to the writing center, you know, which is possible. But with a regular, I always know their boundaries more. So I always know where to push and where to not push. S</p> <p>With regulars I am, directive than I normally am. Because it's, again, I feel like a lot of the time they do book more than one session, because they know that, you know, they want help in this thing. So for me to be non-directive about it is like, odd, b</p>		
<p>Same language/curriculum</p>	<p>It's never something that came up to start. But when it comes to language, sometimes the fact that we both speak Arabic helps out a lot. Because I realize that I am the tutor, yes, but we all have moments of blocks, right, w</p>	<p>With the one-time session, I understand it to a certain extent, but there's limits to it because it's just 30 minutes or maximum an hour</p> <p>I know, how much English you write, and I kind of know your style enough to</p>		<p>Makes no difference</p> <p>Someone from my same culture would understand me more. Definitely, definitely. You would? 100%.</p>

		not impose my own style on you, because I have seen the way you write sentences, I've seen the		
Challenges	So sometimes you worry that you don't live up to that standard, although it's absolutely normal that you're a bit slow, given the fact that you do have other tutees as well. And sometimes I have a regu	<p>With like helping them with the papers, there isn't much of a challenge. It's easier for me. But it's harder for me to actually, like, turn the conversation to the paper, not just general life.</p> <p>I'm always scared that I've shaped her sentence structure to be exactly like mine. Because again, she's been coming with to me for a couple of semesters now. So it's n Yes, for the same assignment, for sure. Maybe you can switch it up per like assignments, because again, a lot of the time, like if she came to me with a creative writing paper,</p>	<p>? No, I don't think so. But I feel like the benefit from that tutor would not outweigh the benefit I'm currently getting.</p> <p>But I feel like the benefit from that tutor would not outweigh the benefit I'm currently getting.</p>	

<p>Comfort level hindering progress</p>	<p>Depends on the tutor. I know how to control myself, not to get into conversations and waste a lot of time. But sometimes the tutors feel like we're very friendly now, so they want to start ranting first.</p>	<p>end like a lot of time just talking and updating each other</p>		<p>Waste more time like chatting. Okay. Rather than just productivity. With a new tutor, I'd have nothing to chat about. So it's just gonna be productivity from beginning to end.</p>
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BEYOND ACADEMIA: UNVEILING THE EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS OF THE TUTOR-TUTEE RELATIONSHIP IN WRITING CENTERS

Zaynab Ghani

Abstract

This research explores the parallels between tutor-tutee relationships in writing centers and the therapist-client dynamic, focusing on themes of emotional support, confidentiality, and personal growth. While writing centers typically aim to address academic challenges, this study investigates how their practices align with therapeutic concepts, promoting personal and emotional development alongside academic improvement. Drawing on previous research that highlights the importance of trust, rapport-building, and the supportive role of peer tutoring, this study seeks to examine these dynamics within the context of the American University of Sharjah Writing Center. Key questions addressed include how tutors navigate emotional disclosures, balance professional boundaries, and encourage student growth while following institutional policies. Methods included asynchronous interviews with a writing center tutor and an ASC ambassador, alongside survey data. Findings suggest that while tutors primarily focus on academic objectives, they often engage in actions that resemble therapeutic support, such as active listening, emotional validation, and providing personalized guidance. However, the study also highlights challenges, including navigating ethical dilemmas, balancing empathy with professional boundaries, and addressing the stigma associated with seeking help. This study emphasizes the importance of including psychologically aware techniques in writing centers, providing new insights into tutors' double role in promoting academic and emotional well-being.

Keywords: Writing Centers, Tutor-Tutee Relationship, Emotional Support, Confidentiality, Personal Growth, Therapeutic Practices, Rapport Building, Peer Tutoring

Introduction

During my first writing center appointment, I noticed interesting similarities between the tutor-tutee dynamic and the therapist-client relationship in therapy. Both relationships rely heavily on guidance, trust, and collaboration. This parallel sparked my curiosity about the deeper connections between these roles, particularly in how they support individuals not just academically but also emotionally. My observation raised a compelling question: How do tutors, like therapists, contribute to emotional well-being while addressing their primary purpose of academic support?

As a psychology major, this question deeply resonated with me. After discussing my initial idea with my professor, I realized how well it aligned with my field of study. Writing centers are traditionally viewed as spaces for promoting academic growth, yet my experiences suggested they might also play a vital role in promoting students' emotional resilience. This research explores the parallels between the tutor-tutee relationship in writing centers and the therapist-client dynamic, focusing on how tutors, like therapists, contribute to both academic success and emotional well-being. By examining the role of emotional support, confidentiality, and personal growth, this study argues that writing centers can benefit from adopting more psychologically informed approaches, emphasizing empathy and non-directive techniques to foster personal growth and confidence in students.

Research Questions

Based on my observations, I propose the following questions:

1. How does the tutor-tutee relationship in UAE writing centers parallel the therapist-client dynamic in terms of emotional support, confidentiality, and personal growth?

To expand on this question, these questions will also be briefly explored:

1. In what ways, if any, do writing tutors contribute to creating a supportive and open environment for students?
2. Can adopting a therapeutic approach in writing tutoring lead to improved student outcomes, both in terms of academic performance and emotional resilience?

Literature Review

The Role of Emotional Support in Tutoring and Therapy

The role of emotional support in both tutoring and therapy is a critical factor in environments centered on guidance and personal growth. Emotional support in this context is defined as the act of offering and receiving care, trust, empathy, and respect from reliable individuals. It plays a significant role in promoting well-being and enhancing effectiveness. Brown (2021) highlights the concept of *motivational interviewing*—a collaborative approach designed to help individuals identify their own motivations for positive change—as a valuable tool in both writing centers and therapeutic settings. This approach mainly consists of four phases: engaging (building rapport), focusing (clarifying the session’s purpose), evoking (eliciting intrinsic motivations), and planning (developing actionable steps). These phases are effective in providing meaningful communication and self-directed growth. For example, when students or clients express emotional struggles, therapists rely on affirmations and reflective listening to guide the conversation, while writing center tutors use affirmations to stimulate tutees’ problem-solving and independence. Additionally, Driscoll and Wells (2020) note that earlier writing center practices often dismissed student emotions, focusing solely on academic tasks and addressing feelings only as a last resort. However, recent shifts, inspired by Goleman’s (2007) concept of *emotional intelligence*, emphasize the importance of recognizing and integrating emotions into sessions. Emotional intelligence enables tutors to handle emotion-rich interactions effectively, reflecting a broader acknowledgment of emotional support as essential to both tutoring and therapy. While both sources agree that emotional support enhances the tutor-tutee or therapist-client relationship by building trust and fostering a deeper connection, Brown showcases how structured approaches like motivational interviewing enable individuals to take charge of their personal and academic growth, while Driscoll and Wells reflect a more paradigm shift, advocating for including emotional awareness into tutoring to better address holistic needs of students. Collectively, these perspectives emphasize the importance of emotional support in creating environments where individuals feel valued, understood, and capable of meaningful change.

Creating a Supportive Environment in Writing Centers and Therapy

When creating a supportive environment in both therapy and writing centers, it is essential to establish techniques that foster trust and comfort.

In writing centers, strategies such as building rapport, adopting a dynamic and non-directive approach during tutorials, and actively listening to tutees are key, as stated by Aldohon (2020). Implementing these strategies from the start ensures that tutees feel comfortable with the session's dynamics and are more receptive to guidance. It is also worth noting that while two tutors in a Canadian academic writing center shared similar beliefs about their practices, their approaches and techniques during sessions differed significantly (Aldohon, 2020). This variation suggests the personalized nature of tutoring, where individual styles and preferences influence interactions. In therapy, similar strategies like rapport building and diagnostic techniques are central to creating a supportive environment. However, Tandos and Stukas (2009) point out that discussing personal difficulties in therapy may evoke a certain level of distress for clients, often as a result of the therapeutic context itself. This highlights the importance of carefully navigating emotional conversations in both settings, as these discussions can significantly impact the individual's comfort and overall experience.

Addressing Confidentiality and Stigma in Building Trust

In therapy, maintaining confidentiality is fundamental to the therapist-client relationship. As Lamont-Mills et al. (2018) highlights, therapists are ethically obligated to inform clients about confidentiality and the conditions under which it may be breached, typically during the initial stages of therapy. To ensure mutual understanding, this disclosure is communicated through oral or written means. However, therapists often find that clients do not fully grasp the importance of confidentiality and revisit the concept throughout their sessions to reinforce its significance. Additionally, Lamont-Mills et al. also note that confidentiality is influenced by culture and context, meaning the setting in which the therapist works can shape how client disclosures are handled. In peer tutoring, while discussions on confidentiality are limited in the literature, the focus often shifts to the stigma associated with seeking academic support. As Ciscell et al. (2016) explains, students may hesitate to approach peer tutors due to concerns that tutors, being fellow students, might harbor the same biases as the general student population. This stigma can discourage students from seeking academic support, as they fear being judged or perceived as incapable. Furthermore, Ciscell et al. mentions that some students may avoid peer tutoring altogether because they worry about appearing "stupid" in front of their peers.

Instead, they might turn to family, friends, or other less intimidating options for assistance. Both therapy and peer tutoring face the shared challenge of addressing the stigmatization of seeking help, which can prevent individuals from accessing the support they need. While confidentiality builds trust in therapy, educating students about the role and benefits of peer tutoring can help reduce stigma in academic settings, encouraging them to view tutoring as a safe and valuable resource.

Fostering Personal Growth Through Peer Tutoring and Therapy

When examining the commonalities between peer tutoring and therapy, one significant shared benefit is their profound impact on personal growth. Both practices provide structured environments where individuals can develop essential skills, build confidence, and gain a deeper sense of self. In academic contexts, Pasion and Marcelo (2024) highlight the strong positive correlation between students' perceived benefits from peer tutoring and their academic performance, particularly in the field of mathematics. This correlation emphasizes how peer tutoring not only enhances students' academic outcomes but also supports their overall development by improving problem-solving abilities, promoting independence, and encouraging collaborative learning. Peer tutoring enables students to become more proactive and self-reliant, which contributes to their academic and personal growth over time. Similarly, therapy fosters personal development by addressing emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of an individual's life. Therefore, Tompkins (2021) emphasizes how collaborative art-making in therapy creates opportunities for clients to build connections and move toward self-realization. This process provides clients with a model for interacting with others while promoting a sense of security and improved communication skills. Moreover, art therapy helps clients develop a stronger sense of identity, self-esteem, and clarity about their future goals. These therapeutic benefits contribute to a deeper understanding of oneself and the ability to navigate through life's challenges, which promotes overall well-being and personal growth. Despite these differing contexts, both peer tutoring and therapy share the ability to guide individuals toward self-improvement. Peer tutoring nurtures academic confidence and intellectual autonomy, while therapy provides tools for emotional resilience and identity development. Both settings encourage individuals to overcome challenges, build meaningful connections, and achieve their goals.

Methods

This study combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies to explore the tutor-tutee relationship in UAE writing centers, drawing parallels to the therapist-client dynamic in terms of emotional support, confidentiality, and personal growth. Data collection focused on an online questionnaire conducted in November 2024, during the first semester of the 2024–2025 academic year (see Appendix A for the full questionnaire). To ensure reliability by reaching the appropriate audience, the questionnaire link was distributed to writing center tutors through WhatsApp. Over three weeks, 16 responses were collected, representing a moderate response rate from a total of 23 tutors. The survey included a mix of question types—open-ended and Likert scale—to gather comprehensive insights for detailed analysis.

In addition to the survey, two asynchronous interviews were conducted to provide supplementary insights into the tutor-tutee dynamics—one student being a writing center tutor and the other an Academic Support Centre peer ambassador, both enrolled at the American University of Sharjah. All participants volunteered to take part in the study. This sample size was considered sufficient to achieve the research objectives.

Findings and Discussion

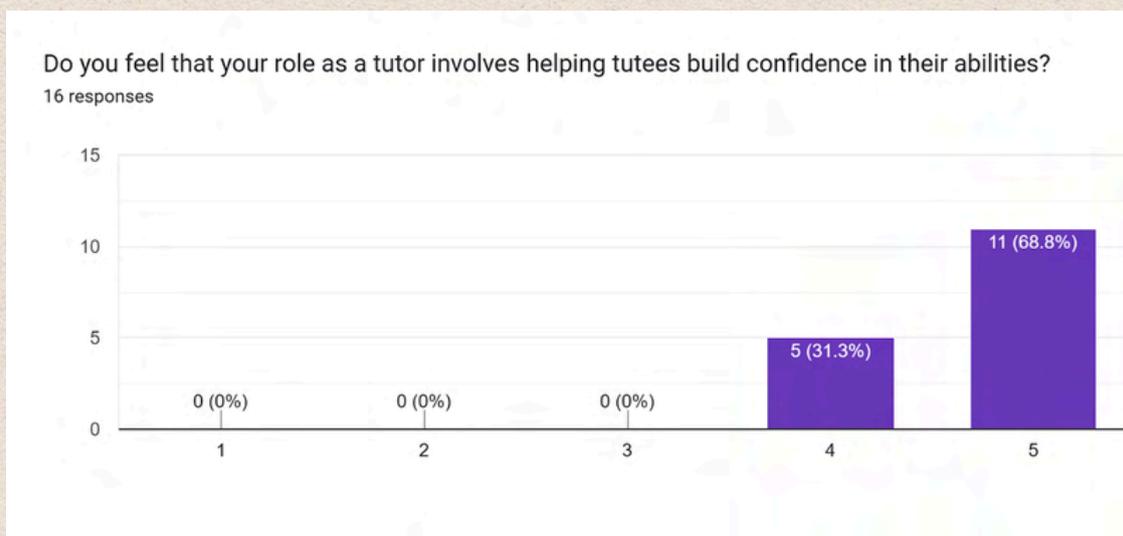
In this section of the paper, I will analyze and compare preferences for the tutor-tutee relationship to the therapist-client dynamic using survey and interview data. The discussion will be based on the 16 survey results and the findings from the two interviews. It should be noted that, for the Likert scale, 1 indicates the lowest level (Not at all /Never /Not important /Very uncomfortable) and 5 indicates the highest level (Always /A great deal /Completely /Extremely important /Very comfortable).

Emotional Support

A critical aspect of the tutor-tutee relationship is maintaining a balance between providing emotional support and addressing academic objectives. While writing centers are primarily academic spaces, tutors frequently go through situations that require balancing empathy with academic guidance.

Figure 1

Bar graph displaying tutors perceptions of their role to help tutees build confidence



The results, as shown in the graph, indicate that the majority of tutors strongly agreed with this statement. Notably, none of the tutors selected lower ratings, suggesting a unanimous belief among participants that building confidence is a key aspect of their role. This highlights the importance that tutors place on providing emotional support alongside academic guidance. This aligns with Goleman’s (2007) concept of emotional intelligence, which highlights the importance of recognizing and integrating emotions to create a more effective and supportive learning environment.

In regards to the interviews conducted, the writing center tutor described how rapport-building typically begins the session, creating a safe space for tutees to share their thoughts or feelings, as reiterated by Aldohon (2020). Interestingly, the tutor observed that tutees often redirect the session toward their academic agenda, highlighting their focus on achieving tangible outcomes. The tutor also emphasized maintaining an organic rhythm during sessions and, when needed, gently steering the conversation back to academic goals in a way that respects the tutee’s time (see Appendix E for details). For instance, they might say, “I’m so glad you felt comfortable sharing, but I want to ensure we make the most of your time—what would you like to focus on today?” This approach blends empathy with productivity, which mirrors therapeutic practices where trust-building lays the foundations for progress.

Similarly, the peer ambassador at the Academic Support Center pointed out the role of empathy in addressing emotional needs while focusing on academics. They described how acknowledging a student’s stress is followed by actionable advice, such as organizing study schedules or managing assignments (see Appendix F for more details).

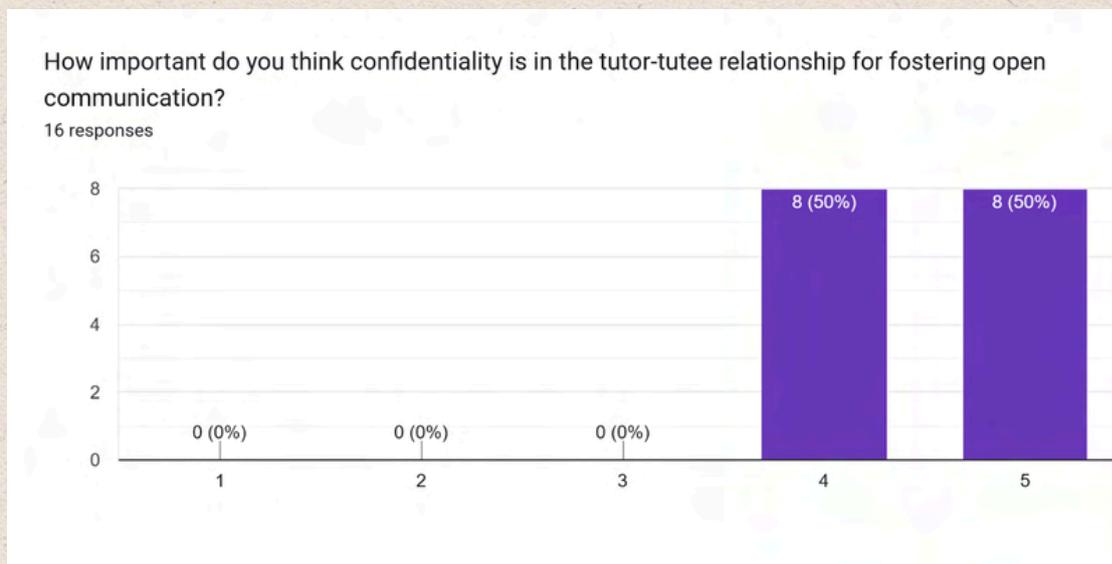
This dual approach both reduces emotional burdens and provides students with practical strategies for success, reinforcing trust in the relationship. Like the therapeutic practice of connecting emotional well-being to solutions, this method validates emotions while driving outcomes, which further illustrates the parallels between tutoring and therapy. While emotional support is critical for building trust, the matter of confidentiality further complicates the tutor–tutee dynamic.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is essential for building confidence in the tutor-tutee relationship; yet, both surveys and interviews provided different findings, highlighting how keeping to this concept might create obstacles and ethically challenging situations. The extent to which tutors can or should promise privacy directly affects the level of openness and trust in the tutor–tutee relationship.

Figure 2

Bar graph depicting the importance of confidentiality in fostering open communication



This graph highlights the significance of confidentiality in fostering open communication within the tutor-tutee relationship. These findings highlight the critical role confidentiality plays in creating a safe environment where tutees feel comfortable sharing their challenges and concerns. By ensuring confidentiality, tutors can build trust and allow tutees to engage more openly and benefit fully from support offered during sessions.

Additionally, Lamont-Mills et al. (2018) highlights how confidentiality is shaped by culture and context, with the specific setting influencing how disclosures are managed.

This dynamic is echoed in one of the interviews, where a writing center tutor shared an instance of a tutee becoming vulnerable and disclosing personal struggles during a session. While respecting confidentiality, the tutor was conflicted with whether they were trained to handle such sensitive information. To overcome this, the tutor balanced empathy and professional boundaries by recommending campus counseling services as a resource, framing the suggestion in a way that was optional rather than directive. This approach validated the tutee's vulnerability and ensured their trust was maintained while acknowledging the tutor's professional limitations. The tutor also shared ethical dilemmas, such as assisting students with AI-generated content like ChatGPT-written papers. While confidentiality policies within the AUS writing center prevented reporting such cases, the tutor expressed discomfort in helping students with AI-produced work, as it conflicted with academic integrity. This highlights the challenges tutors face in balancing emotional support, ethical considerations, as well as institutional policies.

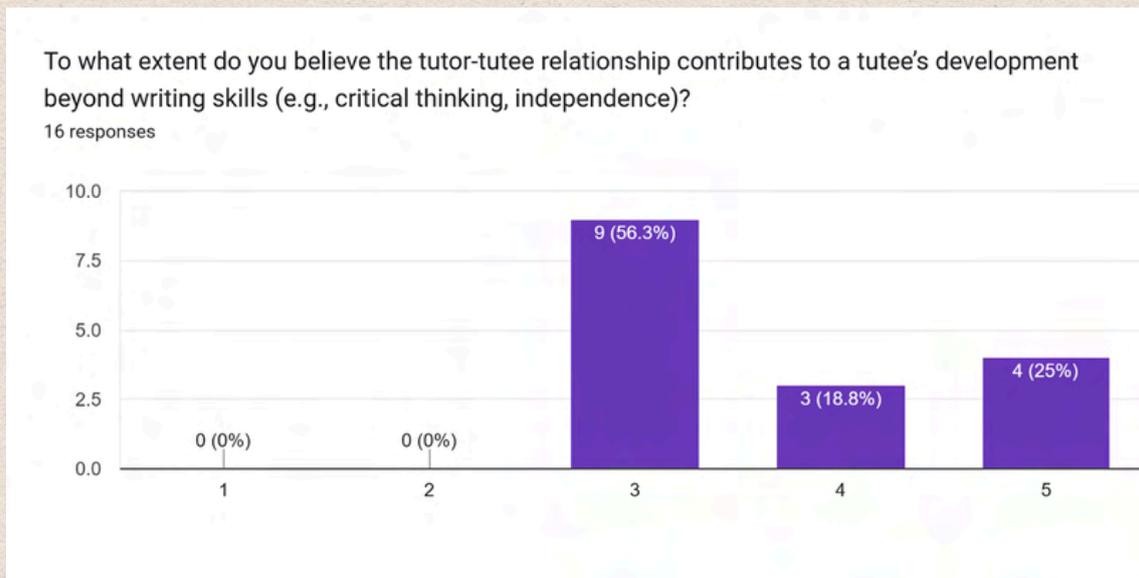
In contrast, the ASC peer ambassador noted, "I have yet to encounter a situation like this," suggesting that personal disclosures depend on context, the nature of the peer relationship, and individual students' comfort levels. These experiences emphasize the complexity of confidentiality in tutoring, where professional boundaries, trust, and cultural context all play a role in shaping the tutor-tutee dynamic. But, beyond trust and confidentiality, tutoring also has the potential to promote meaningful personal growth among students.

Personal Growth

Personal growth within the tutor-tutee dynamic is a key outcome of writing center interactions, as students often experience increased confidence, self-efficacy, and a deeper engagement with their academic and personal development over time.

Figure 3

Bar graph depicting tutors' assessments of how much the tutor-tutee connection helps a tutee's development beyond writing skills.



As illustrated by the graph, there is a significant difference in personal growth results between tutor-tutee partnerships in writing centers. The statistics show that the tutor-tutee relationship in writing centers promote a tutor's development beyond writing skills, including traits like independence and critical thinking.

Pasion and Marcelo (2024) demonstrate how peer tutoring improves academic performance while also fostering personal growth by encouraging problem-solving, independence, and collaborative learning. Similarly, the writing center tutor gave the example of a freshman tutee who made significant personal and academic progress over several sessions. Initially hesitant, the tutee gained confidence as she actively participated in the feedback process and expressed their concerns freely. This transition, driven by the relationship and trust established with the tutor, exemplifies tutors' dual role in promoting academic success and emotional well-being.

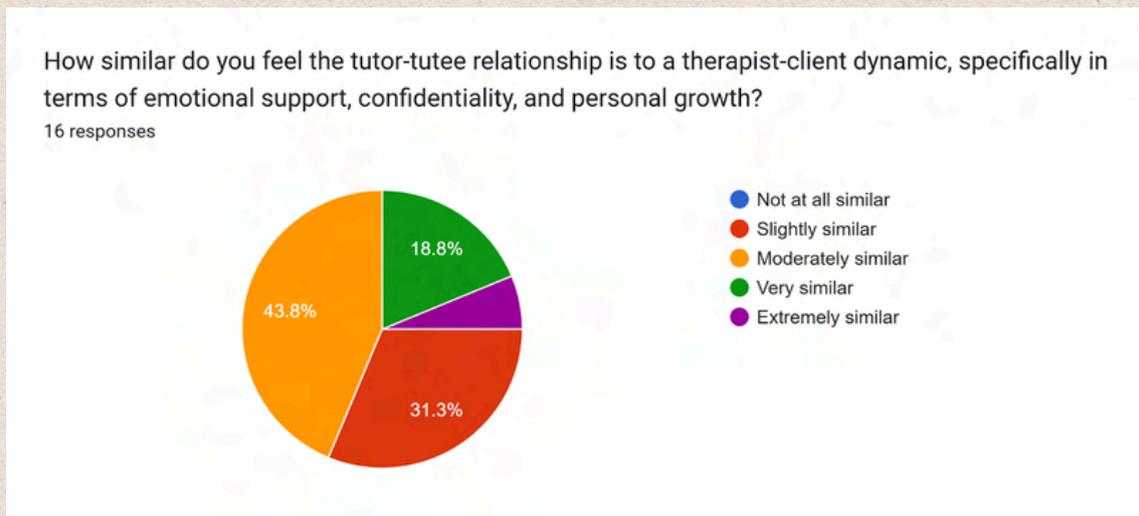
Similarly, the ASC ambassador described an instance in which a student who struggled with time management and study abilities made significant personal progress with tailored assistance. Participating in goal-setting exercises and structured workshops helped the student move from feeling overwhelmed to establishing actionable solutions and a sense of control over their academic duties. The ambassador observed that continuous attendance at workshops encouraged persistence and increased the students' self-efficacy, which resulted in a more positive academic approach. Taken together, the findings on emotional support, confidentiality, and personal growth provide a broader picture of how tutoring overlaps with but also differs from the therapeutic model.

Overall Perspective

Bringing these findings together, it becomes clear that the tutor-tutee relationship is multifaceted, combining academic and emotional support in ways that occasionally resemble therapy.

Figure 4

Pie chart showing perceived similarities between tutor-tutee and therapist-client relationships



According to the pie chart, most (43.8%) respondents acknowledged some degree of similarity, particularly in aspects such as emotional support, confidentiality, and personal growth. This suggests that while tutors and therapists operate within distinct professional boundaries, there are shared elements in their roles that revolve around building trust, addressing individual needs, and promoting development. However, the differences in purpose and expertise remain evident, as participants did recognize that the academic focus of tutoring sets it apart from the more holistic and emotional scope of therapy.

The responses from the writing center tutor and ASC ambassador illustrate both the parallels and distinctions between tutor-tutee relationships in writing centers and therapist-client interactions. They emphasize the back-to-back nature of sessions, the importance of quickly identifying and addressing concerns, and the emotional demands of providing help in a limited time frame. The response shows the writing center tutor's appreciation of the significant social and emotional toll that these interactions may have, comparing it to the nature of therapy, especially for introverts who find this level of intense socialization highly demanding.

The tutor also observes the one-sided nature of the contact, with the emphasis on providing support rather than a reciprocal exchange, which aligns it with the therapist-client dynamic.

The Academic Support Centre peer ambassador, on the other hand, recognizes some parallels, such as the shared goals of offering guidance and encouraging progress, but distinguishes between the two jobs more clearly. They emphasize their focus on academic support while acknowledging the importance of holistic student well-being. Unlike therapists, tutors do not delve into personal or emotional issues beyond their scope, instead guiding students toward appropriate resources when necessary.

While this distinction is clear, including psychologically aware practices can enhance the support writing centers provide without blurring the boundaries between tutoring and therapy. Practices such as mindfulness exercises can help tutees navigate stress and build self-efficacy, aligning emotional support with academic objectives. By doing so, students can receive the necessary support without compromising either their academic progress or the tutor's well-being. These results suggest that while writing center tutors are not therapists, implementing selective, psychologically informed practices such as empathy, active listening, or stress-management strategies can improve tutoring interactions. However, clear boundaries must be kept in place to preserve both academic integrity and the well-being of tutors.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

While this study sheds light on the significance of emotional support, confidentiality, and personal development in writing center dynamics, some limitations should be noted. First, potential biases in interview responses must be addressed. Because participants were aware of the study's academic environment, their responses could have been impacted by a desire to meet perceived expectations. This may reduce the authenticity and depth of the ideas presented. Additionally, as the primary research was conducted exclusively at the American University of Sharjah, the findings may not be generalizable to other academic settings in the UAE. While the study draws parallels between tutoring and therapy techniques, the interview dynamics were more academic than therapeutic. This distinction means that some aspects of the therapeutic dynamic such as deeper exploration of emotional concerns or the provision of structured psychological support—were missing.

As a result, the study's findings may underestimate the potential impact of including emotionally supportive methods similar to therapy into writing center interactions. These limitations point out the need for further research, a larger range of perspectives, and a more explicit focus on the therapeutic potential of tutoring methods.

Conclusion

This study highlights the multidimensional significance of writing center tutors, who meet both intellectual and emotional needs. While maintaining a clear distinction from therapy, tutors frequently engage in methods that promote tutees' personal growth, such as developing trust, validating feelings, and providing advice outside of academic tasks. Three themes were particularly central to this dynamic: emotional support, which promotes comfort and confidence in students; confidentiality, which establishes trust and openness; and personal growth, which enables students to develop independence and self-efficacy. Together, these findings demonstrate that tutoring extends way beyond academic correction but also offers students both intellectual and emotional enrichment.

Challenges, including addressing ethical issues and maintaining professional boundaries, point out the complexities of these professions and the importance of instructors staying within their area of competence. At the same time, these challenges highlight potential for writing centers to implement psychologically aware methods that are consistent with their academic aim. As a result, writing centers can continue to evolve as spaces that not only boost writing abilities but also enable students to grow personally and intellectually. Ultimately, this study lays the groundwork for further research into how writing centers might more effectively balance these two goals, thereby enhancing the student experience and expanding the role of tutoring in higher education.

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Appendices
Appendix A
Survey Questions

Exploring the Tutor-Tutee Relationship in Writing Centers ✕ ⋮

B *I* U  

For each question, select the response that best reflects your experience. This survey is anonymous, and your responses will be used for research purposes only.

After section 1 [Continue to next section](#) ▼

Section 2 of 5

Section 1: Emotional Support ✕ ⋮

Description (optional)

How often do you find yourself providing encouragement and reassurance to tutees beyond just addressing their writing concerns? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	<input type="radio"/>	Always				

To what extent do you feel that tutees seek advice from you on managing stress or anxiety related to their academic work? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	A great deal				

Do you feel that your role as a tutor involves helping tutees build confidence in their abilities? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	Completely				

Section 3 of 5

Section 2: Confidentiality

Description (optional)

How important do you think confidentiality is in the tutor-tutee relationship for fostering open communication? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not important	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely important				

Have you ever had a tutee disclose personal challenges that go beyond writing issues (e.g., stress, personal struggles)? *

Yes

No

If yes, how comfortable did they seem when sharing this information?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very uncomfortable	<input type="radio"/>	Very comfortable				

Section 4 of 5

Section 3: Personal Growth and Development

Description (optional)

In your experience, how frequently do you observe tutees applying the feedback you provide to not only improve their current assignment but also their overall writing approach? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	<input type="radio"/>	Always				

To what extent do you believe the tutor-tutee relationship contributes to a tutee's development beyond writing skills (e.g., critical thinking, independence)? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	A great deal				

Do you feel that working with tutees on their writing has allowed you to grow personally or professionally (e.g., in communication skills, empathy)? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	Completely				

Section 4: Overall Perspective



Description (optional)

How similar do you feel the tutor-tutee relationship is to a therapist-client dynamic, specifically ^{*} in terms of emotional support, confidentiality, and personal growth?

- Not at all similar
- Slightly similar
- Moderately similar
- Very similar
- Extremely similar

Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience regarding the tutor-tutee relationship in the writing center?

Long answer text

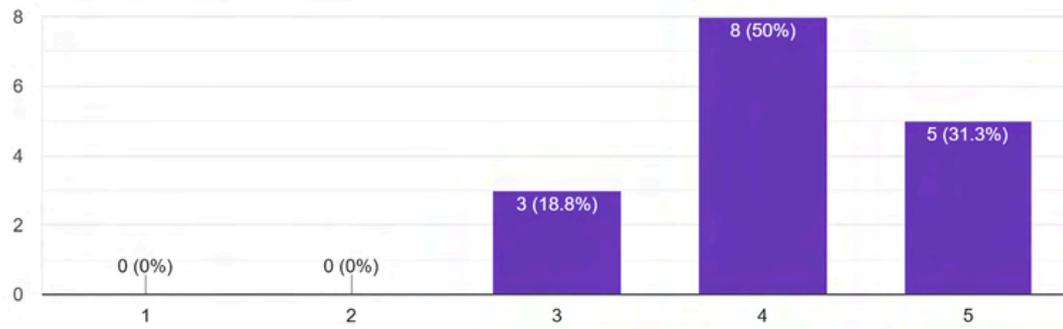
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Appendix B

Survey Responses

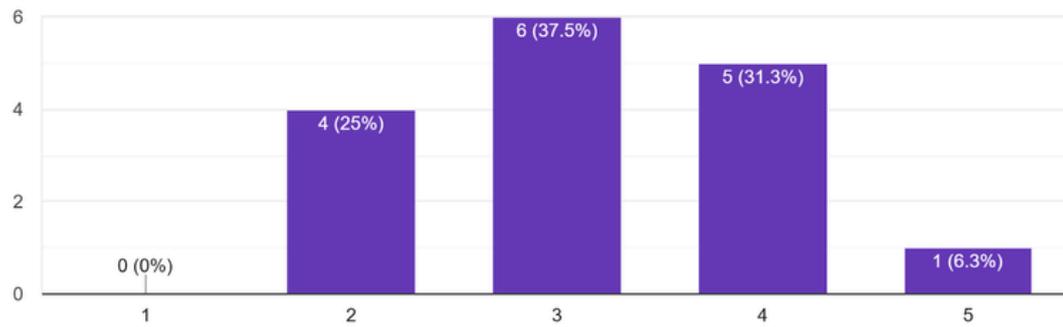
How often do you find yourself providing encouragement and reassurance to tutees beyond just addressing their writing concerns?

16 responses



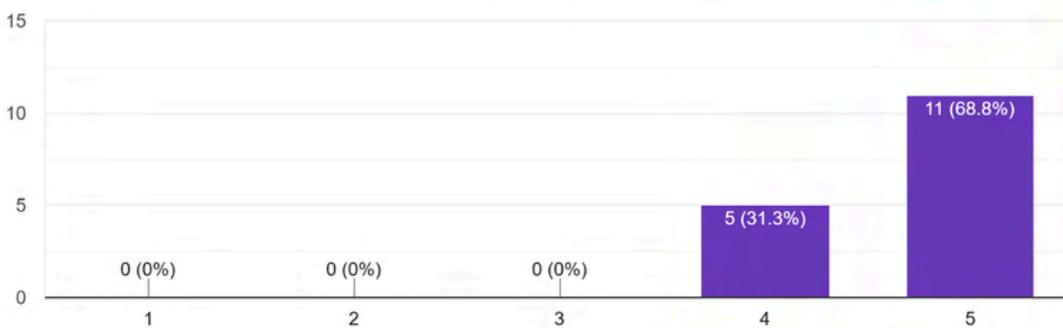
To what extent do you feel that tutees seek advice from you on managing stress or anxiety related to their academic work?

16 responses



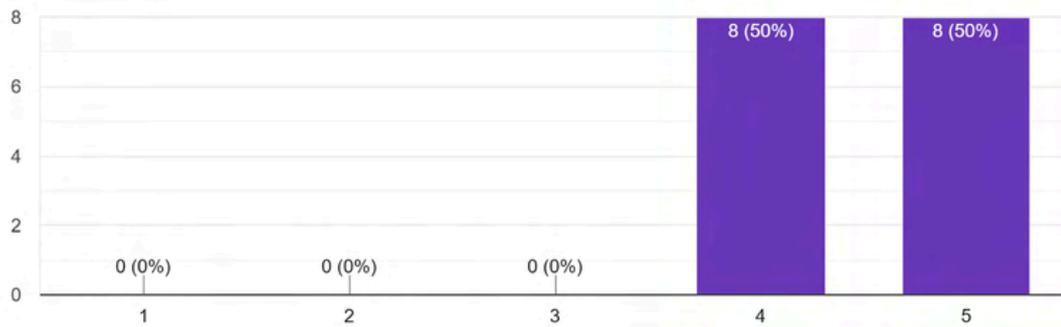
Do you feel that your role as a tutor involves helping tutees build confidence in their abilities?

16 responses



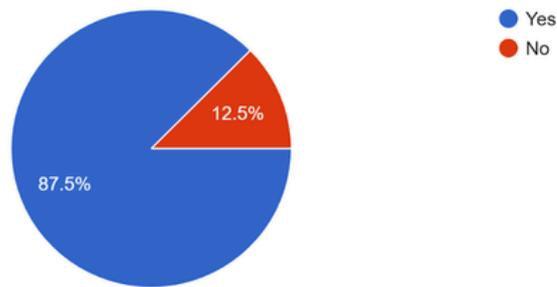
How important do you think confidentiality is in the tutor-tutee relationship for fostering open communication?

16 responses



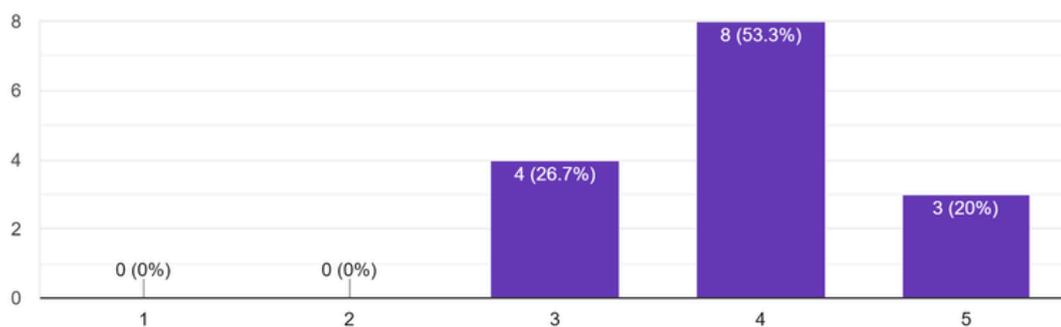
Have you ever had a tutee disclose personal challenges that go beyond writing issues (e.g., stress, personal struggles)?

16 responses



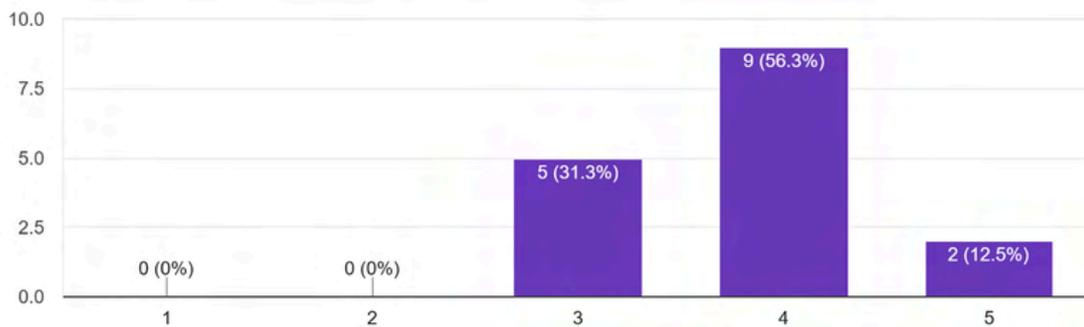
If yes, how comfortable did they seem when sharing this information?

15 responses



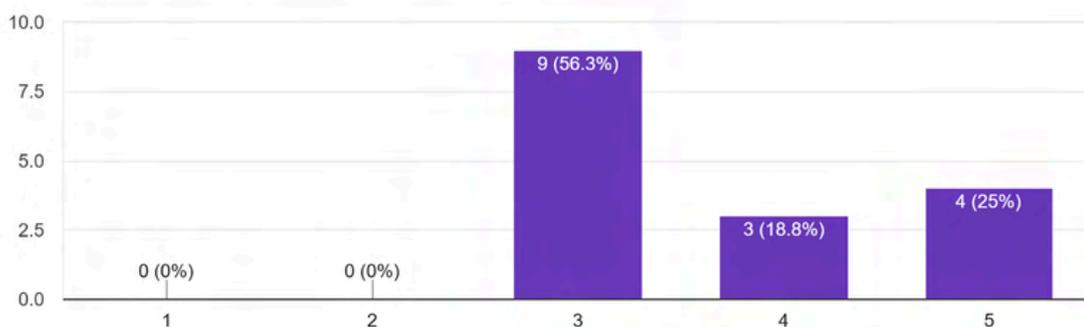
In your experience, how frequently do you observe tutees applying the feedback you provide to not only improve their current assignment but also their overall writing approach?

16 responses



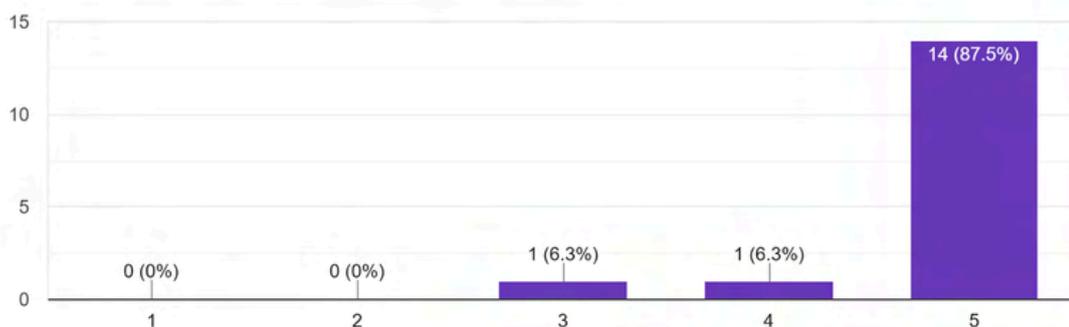
To what extent do you believe the tutor-tutee relationship contributes to a tutee's development beyond writing skills (e.g., critical thinking, independence)?

16 responses



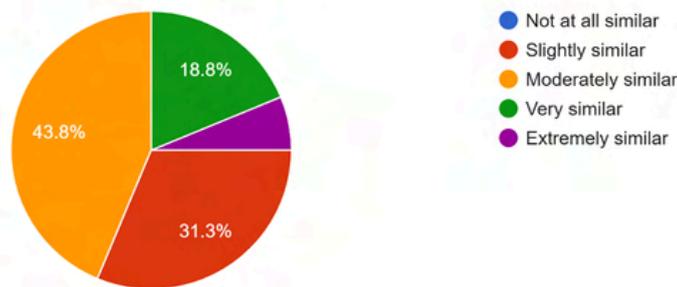
Do you feel that working with tutees on their writing has allowed you to grow personally or professionally (e.g., in communication skills, empathy)?

16 responses



How similar do you feel the tutor-tutee relationship is to a therapist-client dynamic, specifically in terms of emotional support, confidentiality, and personal growth?

16 responses



Participant 1:

The tutor-tutee relationship is highly context dependent. Sometimes sessions flow smoothly, and sometimes they don't. Even when the tutor tries to engage with the tutee, there are various factors that might effect the session, which are not controllable by the tutor. Still, I believe a tutor's efforts in these situations goes a long way. As long as the tutor tries to make the session comfortable, and productive the tutor has done their job. In some situations when a session does not go according to the plan it is natural to worry, still there is a scope to make amendments.

Encourage the tutee to come to the WC again, and let them know to book with other tutors. Tell them, they can have another session with you where you try again because a writing session goes both ways. The tutor learns with the tutee if not more than the tutee. Every session acts a experience that teaches me to be more empathetic to students, especially freshmen student's concerns. Sometimes, it is also helpful to acknowledge that things are awkward because it brings you down to the student's level. To build a relationship with the tutee, you have to be humble and empathetic to the student's concerns, while you engage in a respectful manner. However, you should also prioritize your boundaries.

Participant 2:

I think I have had to console or encourage my tutees very often. Many times when I compliment their writing, they can't believe it and put themselves down a lot. They also share their university and personal struggles often.

Participant 3:

A lot of tutees have confided in me about various challenges - some academic (a writing prof they don't like, etc) others very personal. I have had a tutee of mine cry in a session about a personal challenge, and I reassured them that 'anything they say in the session stays in the session'. I do think, though, that sometimes tutors need to be careful about getting too close to a therapist-client dynamic - you don't want to deceive a tutee into thinking that you are the appropriate person to provide the kind of emotional or mental support they may need. I have never had such a situation come up, but if necessary, I could see myself gently letting a tutee know that if they feel like they would benefit from speaking to a professional, the university also has counseling services available (something we discuss in WRI 221!). But regardless, I think the writing center lends itself to a kind of 'peer counseling' approach: you're a peer, but also not quite, to the tutee and so they feel comfortable confiding in someone who is similar enough to not be intimidating but who also seems like a figure of authority.

Appendix C

Writing Center Tutor Interview Questions

1) How do you create a supportive and comfortable environment for your tutees?

Emotional Support

2) How do you balance being empathetic with maintaining focus on academic goals during sessions?

Confidentiality

3) Have you encountered situations where maintaining confidentiality was challenging? If so, how did you handle it?

Personal Growth

4) Have you observed noticeable improvements in a tutee's confidence or skills throughout a session(s)? Can you share an example?

Comparisons to the Therapist-Client Dynamic

5) Do you see any similarities between your role as a tutor and that of a therapist? Why or why not?

6) How do you handle situations where tutees seek advice or support beyond academic concerns?

Challenges

7) Have you ever had a session where the dynamics were particularly difficult? How did you approach it?

Appendix D

ASC Peer Ambassador Interview Questions

- 1) Can you briefly describe your role as a peer ambassador and how you perceive your relationship with your students seeking help?
- 2) How do you create a supportive and comfortable environment for your students?
Emotional Support
- 3) How do you balance being empathetic with maintaining focus on academic goals during sessions?
Confidentiality
- 4) Have you encountered situations where maintaining confidentiality was challenging? If so, how did you handle it?
Personal Growth
- 5) Have you observed noticeable improvements in a student's confidence or skills throughout a session(s)? Can you share an example?
Comparisons to the Therapist-Client Dynamic
- 6) Do you see any similarities between your role as a peer ambassador and that of a writing center tutor? Why or why not?
- 7) How do you handle situations where students seek advice or support beyond academic concerns?
Challenges
- 8) Have you ever had a session where the dynamics were particularly difficult? How did you approach it?

EXAMINING ATTITUDES TOWARDS GRAMMARLY AND THE WRITING CENTER AMONG STUDENTS AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF SHARJAH

Yousef Alafghani

Abstract

This paper examines the general perceptions of Grammarly and the Writing Center among students at the American University of Sharjah (AUS). Although other Artificial Intelligence (AI) software such as ChatGPT seem to dominate the discourse surrounding AI use in both the academic writing scene and the Writing Center, Grammarly is also an important tool in that conversation precisely because people assume that it is a benign alternative to other forms of AI. Users have a tendency to heavily rely on the program, and its feedback, despite its flaws, is taken for granted. Therefore, I make the hypothesis that students will have a much more negative perception of the Writing Center than they will with Grammarly. In order to examine the accuracy of this hypothesis, a study was conducted via an online-administered survey and an interview with a writing center tutor at AUS. Results from the survey revealed that students are aware of the faults behind Grammarly's feedback, and have a more positive attitude towards the Writing Center. The interview with the Writing Center tutor delineated that Grammarly is not particularly perceived as a threat by other tutors at the Writing Center, but rather a tool that must be used thoughtfully. Further research on Grammarly and the Writing Center would aid in advancing the discourse surrounding the use of non-generative AI (GAI) in various academic contexts.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Grammarly, Writing Center, American University of Sharjah, Academic Writing.

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become a dominant tool in the academic writing scene, particularly with the growing influx of university students relying on generative AI (GAI) software for developing their writing, namely ChatGPT. Though there is a general tendency to synonymize both AI and GAI as interchangeable terms, their distinctions are notable. While AI refers to a set of technological processes utilized for performing tasks analogous to human intelligence, GAI is a subset of AI that is trained to learn patterns and structures from the data it is fed and produces “text, images, videos, or other forms of data” similar to that data (“Generative artificial intelligence,” 2025). GAI is a fairly recent addition to the conversation surrounding the moral and ethical issues of technology within academic writing. As technological advancements in GAI continue to grow, there has been a shift in the general perception of writing and the way in which it is being engaged with. Grammarly—an AI-powered application designed to identify errors in grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, word choice, and tone—was a prominently used program by university students before the advent of ChatGPT, mostly catering towards English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students. However, Grammarly has shown to be fundamentally fractured in its stylistic suggestions and its corrections are often misleading for its users.

Beyond these AI-powered programs, many students have the option of obtaining peer-to-peer services for written assignments. The writing center allows students to receive peer assistance and support for developing their writing skills, giving students the necessary tools to strengthen their writing proficiency. However, there seems to be a growing disregard for writing centers across various academic institutions, which either stems from a blatant negligence of such services or a reluctance to receive help from other peers out of fear of judgement or inadequacy. As a result, students gear towards AI software such as Grammarly to receive quick and automated feedback on their writing. However, the students’ sound and creativity in an assignment is just as significant as the content itself, and Grammarly may jeopardize the presence of that voice, risking the appearance of misplaced grammatical choices in their writing.

Although ChatGPT has proven to be a substantially severe case of GAI misuse in academic writing, Grammarly is more passive in its use of AI, which is primarily non-generative, and is not given the same amount of caution by writing instructors and tutors as GAI programs are.

When students decide to visit the writing center with their assignments already modified by Grammarly, it can affect the ways in which tutors assist their peers and the appropriate measures they take in providing support for students to improve their writing. On top of that, Grammarly may impede the students' ability to develop their writing skills in the long term. Based on these issues, the following research question is raised: What are the implications of Grammarly on university students' ability to write effectively within various academic contexts? As this question is being answered, my paper will examine the issues within Grammarly's automated feedback system, the history of AI discourse in the writing center, attitudes towards Grammarly and the writing center, and the effectiveness of Grammarly in relation to writing center services.

Literature Review

In order to understand the implications of Grammarly use among university students and what it means for attitudes regarding the writing center, it is important to observe the program that Grammarly uses for its automated feedback. Ghufron and Rosyida (2018) identify that Grammarly is effective in dealing with issues of word choice, grammar, spelling, and punctuation, but has difficulties in improving content-related and organizational issues (p. 401). What this outlining of the strengths and weaknesses of Grammarly means is that the software is imperfect, but not completely unreliable. Grammarly has shown to facilitate a basic level of assistance and learning for individuals who struggle to develop their writing skills. However, Ghufron and Rosyida do not take into account the over-reliance of students on Grammarly as a factor in curbing their ability to write effectively and independently. In fact, "The overreliance on [automated written corrective feedback (AWCF)] indicated more limited cognitive engagement which led to feedback's blind acceptance" (Koltovskaia, 2020, abstract). This issue of "blind acceptance" becomes a considerable problem when Grammarly is being integrated into educational spaces, especially when students who may not have extensive experience in writing blindly accept Grammarly's feedback.

With that being said, Grammarly does not necessarily represent a unique case of AI use in academic writing nor is it a newfound issue at all. As a matter of fact, Bryan (2024) identifies that “software discourse in writing center studies” stretches all the way back to 1978, and that “these earlier conversations offer current practitioners and researchers considerable opportunity to assess the present moment within the larger history of writing center discourse” (p. 23). By examining that history, writing center tutors are able to acknowledge the concept of the writing center as an on-going, developing project for the academic writing scene, while also allowing them to tackle issues of AI usage strategically and effectively. Additionally, an understanding of the history behind AI discourse (particularly Grammarly) will allow for a deeper evaluation of the more fundamental issues regarding different attitudes towards AI software and the writing center.

Looking directly at the clashes between Grammarly and the writing center reveals the possibilities and conditions of AI being integrated into various academic spaces, raising questions regarding the balancing of face-to-face tutoring and Grammarly usage. Zhang, Özer, and Bayazeed (2020) have examined the use of Grammarly in contrast to face-to-face tutoring at the writing center, revealing that participants used Grammarly more than they visited the writing center, but have used face-to-face tutoring for a “wider variety of purposes compared to Grammarly” (p. 3). It seems that Grammarly users, on a general level, have an awareness of the flaws and imperfections of the application’s corrections and feedback. In fact, students who use Grammarly and visit the writing center use both tools for “different needs in different contexts” (Zhang, Özer & Bayazeed, 2020, p. 3). Therefore, people are, to a large extent, capable of using AI-powered software cautiously and effectively within academic contexts. However, despite the fact that students have the capabilities of balancing AI software such as Grammarly with real life, face-to-face assistance with their writing, people have also been shown to be extremely reliant on such software, affecting them both on an academic and a cognitive level (Koltovskaia, 2020, discussion and conclusion, para. 2). It is important to note that the effect of AI on students’ academic and cognitive performance comes from this over-reliance on such technology, suggesting that Grammarly can still be integrated into academic writing if students are taught to use it efficiently.

There is also the issue of Grammarly as an inadequate substitute for face-to-face tutoring. Dembsey (2017) suggests that Grammarly is unable to give the “same type of support possible in a writing center consultation, such as agency, praise, individualized feedback, and assistance on issues beyond individual sentences” (p. 89). AI software such as Grammarly, beyond the errors in its feedback, lack the human qualities behind peer-tutoring that make the tutor-tutee dynamic intrinsically complex. In fact, even within its automated feedback, “[Grammarly’s] comments on grammar were too technical and inaccurate to promote learning in students from a wide range of backgrounds” (Dembsey, 2017, p. 89). Based on these findings, what Grammarly appears to lack the most is adaptation and context. Unlike the relationship between the tutor and tutee in the Writing Center—where tutors need to adapt and conform to the tutee’s needs in order to assist them effectively—Grammarly goes by a set of rules based on the algorithm it is built upon (hence the term “automated feedback”). Therefore, a strict use of Grammarly on its own deprives students of the nuanced and applied assistance they would otherwise be acquiring from other face-to-face tutoring programs.

Overall, based on the research reviewed, the conversation seems to veer towards the implications of Grammarly on the perceptions of writing center services and academic writing as a whole. Additionally, researchers have raised concerns regarding the actual effectiveness of Grammarly in giving correct and adaptable feedback to its users. Although there is research that directly discusses concerns with Grammarly in relation to the writing center (Zhang, Özer & Bayazeed, 2020. Dembsey, 2017), the existing literature on this topic is not sufficient enough to fully and holistically address the issues of Grammarly within a writing center and academic writing context. Therefore, my paper aims to further build upon the conversation surrounding the topic of Grammarly and the Writing Center, enriching and developing upon the discourse surrounding this issue. I plan to apply my knowledge on this topic—based on the literature I have reviewed—within the context of the American University of Sharjah (AUS). In doing so, I will provide a layered discussion surrounding AI software use in academic writing among university students at AUS, addressing some of the more specific issues of Grammarly use (and AI use as a whole) within the institution.

Methodology

Data was collected over a period of two weeks in October 2024 at AUS. A mix of quantitative and qualitative data was collected through two primary research methods: an online survey administered to all AUS students and an audio-recorded interview with a writing center tutor.

The Survey

An English-language online survey consisting of multiple-choice and written questions (see Appendix A) was administered and made available to all AUS students through university-oriented group chats on WhatsApp. The survey includes 30 questions separated into the following four sections:

1. Demographic questions (age, gender, university standing, etc.),
2. Questions about Grammarly use,
3. Questions about AUS's Writing Center,
4. Two questions asking participants to compare their experiences with both Grammarly and the Writing Center.

In regards to Grammarly, the survey collected information about students' frequency of Grammarly use, possible reasons as to why they would use it, and their general perceptions on Grammarly's automated feedback. As for the Writing Center, the survey featured questions regarding frequency of participants' visits to the Writing Center, their motivation for going there, and their attitudes towards the service.

A total of 43 individuals (20% male, 77.5% female, and 2.5% unspecified) participated in the survey. The majority of the participants (92.5%) were in the 18–23-year age range. Most participants were sophomores (47.5%), whereas the rest were either first-year students, juniors, seniors, or graduates.

The Interview

I conducted a semi-structured interview with a writing center tutor, Soha Abdalgawad, in the Writing Center hall. I asked Abdalgawad six questions (see Appendix B) about her encounter with Grammarly usage among her tutees, her general perceptions on the application, and her strategy of assisting students who depend on Grammarly's corrections and feedback.

Findings

Survey Results

When asked if they were familiar with Grammarly, all 40 respondents indicated that they were, indeed, aware of the application. Thirty-six of the forty participants have used Grammarly in the past, with 63.9% of those 36 participants stating that they still use Grammarly. Additionally, 67.5% of participants reported having previously visited the Writing Center at AUS. However, 57.1% of the individuals who have not been to the Writing Center indicated that they would consider going there in the future. Among the other questions on Grammarly and the Writing Center (see Appendix A), the most important are as follows:

When asked, “On a scale from 1-5, how much do you trust Grammarly's feedback?” (see Appendix A, part 2, question 8), 15.8% of the participants selected ‘2,’ 50% selected ‘3,’ 28% selected ‘4,’ and only 5.3% selected ‘5.’ None of the participants selected ‘1.’ In another question, when asked, “what aspects of your writing does Grammarly help you with?” (see Appendix A, part 2, question 10), most participants (89.5%) selected “grammar and punctuation.” Notably, 60.3% of participants used it for clarifying spelling mistakes, 44.7% used it for help in word choice, and 47.4% used it for sentence structure. A few respondents also used Grammarly for either paragraph structuring, style and tone, or other reasons.

Furthermore, when asked about the Writing Center's effectiveness in improving participants' writing (Appendix A, part 3, question 4), 48.7% of individuals thought the service was “extremely helpful.” 38.8% thought it was either “moderately helpful” or “extremely helpful.” Only 6.5% of participants selected “not helpful at all,” suggesting that the general consensus regarding the Writing Center is mostly positive. The participants' positive attitudes towards the Writing Center was also evident when participants were asked if they encountered any limitations with the service (see Appendix A, part 3, question 6). An overwhelming 90% did not find any issues with the Writing Center, and only 6.7% encountered problems. In contrast, when asked the same question regarding Grammarly (see Appendix A, part 2, question 11), 55.3% found that there were issues and limitations with the program, and 47.4% did not encounter any issues with Grammarly.

Finally, when participants were asked which of the two services (Grammarly and the Writing Center) they found more helpful in their writing (see Appendix A, part 4, question 1), 48.8% thought the Writing Center was more helpful, with only 9.3% finding Grammarly to be more helpful for developing their writing proficiency. 25.6% believed both services were equally as helpful, and 16.3% were not sure which of the two services they favored.

Interview Results

An interview was conducted with Writing Center tutor Soha Abdalgawad. I asked Abdalgawad six questions pertaining to Grammarly usage in the Writing Center (see Appendix B), with the conversation lasting around fifteen minutes. The most important questions and answers are as follows:

When asked if Grammarly helps or hinders a student's ability to develop their own writing skills (see Appendix B, question 1), Abdalgawad suggests that it "depends on who uses the program and how they and their knowledge of writing will help them use Grammarly better" (S. Abdalgawad, personal communication, November 18, 2024). If a student has "weak knowledge in writing," then the program will not be used by them efficiently, and will only see it as an editing tool. For instance, Abdalgawad believes that if a student pastes their text into Grammarly, and the program picks up on multiple issues relating to commas, students may accept these edits without looking into what the feedback actually suggests and may not learn from these mistakes. Therefore, students will over-rely on Grammarly to fix their issues without taking the initiatives to develop their writing skills on their own.

Furthermore, when asked if AI software such as Grammarly influenced students' expectations of how a tutorial session should be conducted (see Appendix B, question 3), Abdalgawad suggests that students, in her experience, come to Writing Center sessions for the "tutoring rather than fixing," and that "they really want to learn" (S. Abdalgawad, personal communication, November 18, 2024). In fact, Abdalgawad identified that people who use Grammarly, when they see an excess amount of suggestions and underlines across their text, tend to feel overwhelmed and less confident about their writing. Thus, they accept the feedback without actually double-checking the edits Grammarly makes to their text.

However, when students come to the Writing Center and see that they have the same issues with their paper, they tend to feel more compelled to develop their writing skills in the future, acknowledging the fact that these errors should be taken seriously. Therefore, Abdalgawad believes that the issue of students' perception of the Writing Center may not solely originate from their overreliance on Grammarly, but rather from their preconceived notions or misunderstandings of how a tutoring session is typically managed.

Finally, when asked if Grammarly should be taken with the same caution as ChatGPT in regards to the future of the Writing Center (see Appendix B, question 6), Abdalgawad suggests that Grammarly is a better alternative than ChatGPT "simply because ChatGPT can write for you" (S. Abdalgawad, personal communication, November 18, 2024). Abdalgawad perceives Grammarly to be more "interactive" than ChatGPT since the program gives explanations behind the feedback it gives. She identifies that since many tutees use Grammarly instead of ChatGPT, there is more value to be extrapolated from the former. Overall, Abdalgawad suggests that these students at least have the capacity to be in a proactive position when using Grammarly since its feedback can either be taken for granted or used efficiently. Therefore, it seems that educators are more incentivized to either retaliate against ChatGPT or accentuate the discretion needed to use it responsibly because of a supposed absence of interactivity. It is precisely because of the interactive nature of Grammarly (and the contention surrounding ChatGPT) that Abdalgawad believes that "ChatGPT will die first before Grammarly."

Discussion

The Survey

The overall results of the survey revealed a more positive attitude towards the Writing Center than Grammarly, with most participants being sceptical of the feedback and suggestions the program gives for their written texts.

In terms of Grammarly's program, participants appear to find it more effective in aiding them with grammar, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, and word choice (see Appendix A, part 2, question 10). In comparison, Ghufroon and Rosyida (2018) identify that Grammarly works best with word choice, grammar, spelling and punctuation.

Since these textual issues are minor in relation to the structural and contextual problems of a given text, students may easily overlook smaller issues such as grammar and punctuation. Therefore, Grammarly may aid in assisting students to identify technical problems with their text through a proofreading and copyediting process.

However, as I have discussed in the literature review, there is an issue of Grammarly being over-relied upon by its users, particularly the issue of blind acceptance brought up by Koltovskaia (2020). However, survey results seem to highlight a level of indifference towards Grammarly's feedback. In fact, when participants were asked about their level of trust towards Grammarly's feedback from a scale of 1–5 (see Appendix A, part 2, question 8), 50% of respondents selected '3.' Again, these results may suggest an openness by students to use Grammarly for their writing, but are aware of the mistakes it can make in its feedback, and are thus conscious of the suggestions they accept.

With that being said, survey results also show that Grammarly lacks the human assistance a student would typically receive from the Writing Center. When asked to elaborate on their answer for which service is more helpful in improving their writing skills (see Appendix A, part 4, question 2), one of the participants believed that the "Writing center is a more personal and hands-on experience in exchange for Grammarly, which is an AI just helping you without proper explanations and responses." This observation coincides with what Dembsey (2017) identified regarding Grammarly's ineffectiveness in providing personalized, human feedback. However, it is not surprising that Grammarly is incapable of creating individualized feedback for its users since it is built on an algorithm with a set of rules and code to abide by. Because Grammarly already has a predetermined outline for what an 'errorless' piece of text should look like, it will not be able to provide suggestions based on the context of a given text.

Overall, participants maintained a neutral stance on Grammarly's feedback and suggestions, revealing that students at AUS may have a relatively potent awareness of how faulty the program can be in its edits. In turn, respondents seemed to favor the Writing Center over Grammarly, revealing that personalized assistance may be seen as a priority over the speed and convenience of the application's feedback.

The Interview

The interview with Abdelgawad delineated some of the issues students typically face when using Grammarly for their academic assignments. However, it has been discussed that Grammarly may not be the sole perpetrator of these problems, but rather it could be the students' use of the program. As Abdelgawad suggests, the effectiveness of Grammarly in helping a student with their writing “depends on who uses the program and how they and their knowledge of writing will help them use Grammarly better” (S. Abdelgawad, personal communication, November 18, 2024). It appears that a good majority of Grammarly users have a general awareness of the faults behind Grammarly’s feedback, which was identified by the research conducted by Zhang and Özer (2020), showing that students use Grammarly and the writing center for separate reasons. Therefore, it seems that AUS students who use Grammarly possess more of an awareness of its limited feedback than the average Grammarly user.

Furthermore, Abdelgawad suggests that Grammarly is a safer, more accessible alternative to ChatGPT “simply because ChatGPT can write for you” (S. Abdalgawad, personal communication, November 18, 2024). I believe that because of users’ ability to control the edits and suggestions Grammarly gives for their texts, granting them more agency with their writing, it may be easier for tutors and other educators to confront the use of Grammarly in contrast to ChatGPT. However, as Bryan (2024) emphasizes, AI discourse in the writing center has existed for a long period of time—before the advent of AI software such as Grammarly and ChatGPT. Abdalgawad predicts that ChatGPT is most likely going to meet its demise before Grammarly. With that being said, given the persistence of AI discourse in the writing center and the ubiquity of GAI technology in economic, social, artistic, and academic spaces, It may be difficult to foresee the collapse of such pervasive technological advancements. In fact, there seems to be more of an incentive for creative industries to further utilize these technologies in hopes that “Future GAI will surpass traditional single-media formats, integrating text, images, audio, and even video to create richer and more personalized creative experiences” (Zhang et al., 2025).

These descriptions of "personalized creative experiences," while utopian and optimistic in nature, appear to be promoting a vision of an artistic field of creativity where art is treated as a product to be consumed (and therefore, purely a commodity) rather than a meaningful process of creation. I would even argue that this integration of "text, images, audio, and even video" into these generative models is fundamentally neglectful of that process.

This issue has evidently seeped into academic spaces where GAI software seems to safeguard a quick, efficient, and automated completion of coursework, essays, homework, and various other academic tasks. Unfortunately, despite its initial function as a non-generative AI-powered application, Grammarly has been more than keen to adapt these generative models into their program as of late. A built-in GAI service is currently available for users to utilize, allowing them to generate and automatically rewrite entire blocks of text via a simple prompt (Grammarly, 2024). This service not only amplifies a severe reprimand for university students to effectively develop their academic writing skills, but it further exacerbates the pre-existing problems that stem from Grammarly's supposed non-generative feedback. Although Abdelgawad suggests that there is a foundational difference between Grammarly and ChatGPT "simply because ChatGPT can write for you" (S. Abdelgawad personal communication, November 18, 2024), the utilization of GAI services among Grammarly users could challenge that distinction.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the perceptions regarding Grammarly and the Writing Center by focusing on Grammarly's feedback system, the significance of observing AI discourse in academic writing history, and the effectiveness of Grammarly and the Writing Center in relation to one another. Survey and interview findings have revealed that students at AUS were generally aware of some of the issues with Grammarly's feedback. Furthermore, students have shown a higher favorability towards the Writing Center in comparison to Grammarly, revealing some of the existing scepticism regarding the inadequacies of the program. Another significant topic in relation to this paper, however, is the use of Grammarly by Writing Center tutors. Therefore, by further examining the implications of Grammarly on tutees in the Writing Center, a more in-depth examination of the use of Grammarly among tutors and educators could fill the existing gap in this topic.

Implementing more AI-related workshops/training sessions for tutors in the Writing Center would allow for an elevated awareness and understanding of how Grammarly and other non-generative AI software operate on an algorithmic level and what tutors can do to educate tutees on the productive uses of these programs. However, given the implementation of GAI models in Grammarly's program (and perhaps the following comment stems from a place of scepticism), one may have to question whether writing centers should be promoting these AI-powered services at all.

With that being said, there are limitations regarding the research behind this paper. Although the primary research conducted for the paper was thorough and detailed, the data collection for both the survey and interview results spanned the course of two weeks only. If there had been more time dedicated to collecting the data, more diverse results could have been utilized for the research. Furthermore, conducting interviews with multiple Writing Center tutors instead of one would have allowed for more diverse qualitative data. Finally, although the survey was designed to be as detailed and considerate of the paper's goals as possible, results are based on participants' self-reports, and may not reflect respondents' true perceptions and/or usage of Grammarly and the Writing Center.

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Appendix A
Survey Questions

Part 1: Demographic Questions

1. Please select your gender.

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

2. Select your age group.

- Under 18
- 18–23
- Above 23

3. Select your university standing.

- First-year student
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate

4. What is your major or field of study (you can include your minor if you wish)?

5. Please state your nationality.

6. What is your first/native language?

7. Select the proficiency of your first language.

- Beginner
- Intermediate
- Advanced
- Fluent

8. If you are bilingual, what is your second language?

9. Select the proficiency of your second language.

- Beginner
- Intermediate
- Advanced
- Fluent

Part 2: Questions about Grammarly

1. Are you familiar with Grammarly?

- Yes
- No

2. Have you ever used Grammarly before?

- Yes
- No

3. If you selected 'yes,' do you still use Grammarly?

- Yes
- No

4. If so, how often do you use it?

- Always
- Often
- Occasionally
- Rarely

5. What purpose(s) do you use Grammarly for?

- Academic purposes (for e.g., help with a WRI 101 assignment)
- Personal uses (refining text messages, Emails, etc.)
- Both academic and personal
- Other

6. Do you have the premium/paid version of Grammarly

- Yes
- No

7. If not, are you considering getting Grammarly Premium?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

8. On a scale from 1-5, how much do you trust Grammarly's feedback?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Little to no trust	<input type="radio"/>	Most trust				

9. How helpful do you find Grammarly in improving your writing?

- Extremely helpful
- Very helpful
- Moderately helpful
- Slightly helpful
- Not helpful at all

10. What aspects of your writing does Grammarly help you with? Select all that apply.

- Word choice
- Sentence structure
- Paragraph structure
- Style and tone
- Grammar and punctuation
- Spelling
- Other

11. Have you encountered any errors or limitations while using Grammarly?

- Yes (please specify in "other")
- No
- Other

12. Would you recommend Grammarly to other students?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Part 3: Questions about the Writing Center

1. Have you ever been to the Writing Center at AUS?
 - Yes
 - No
2. If not, are you considering going in the future?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
3. If you went to the Writing Center before, how often do you go there?
 - Rarely
 - Often
 - Sometimes
 - Regularly
4. How helpful do you find the Writing Center in improving your writing?
 - Extremely helpful
 - Slightly helpful
 - Moderately helpful
 - Slightly helpful
 - Not helpful at all
5. What aspects of your writing do you go to the Writing Center for? Select all that apply.
 - Word choices
 - Sentence structure
 - Paragraph structure
 - Organization/flow of ideas
 - Grammar and punctuation
 - Conceptualization/coming up with ideas for the assignment
 - Other
6. Have you encountered any issues or limitations with the Writing Center?
 - Yes (please specify in “other”)
 - No
 - Other

7. Would you recommend the Writing Center to other students?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Part 4: Grammarly vs. the Writing Center

1. Which do you find more helpful in improving your writing?

- Grammarly
- The Writing Center
- Both are equally helpful
- Neither
- Not sure

2. If possible, please elaborate on your answer.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. You've encountered a lot of Grammarly use among students who go to the Writing Center. In your experience, does Grammarly help or hinder the student's ability to develop their writing skills?
2. In what ways has the presence of Grammarly affected your tutoring approach during a Writing Center session? For example, are you more keen on being non-directive with a student if they have excessively used Grammarly for their paper?
3. Often times, students book an appointment with a Writing Center tutor expecting their papers to be 'fixed.' Do you think AI software like Grammarly have influenced students' expectations of how a tutorial session should go?
4. Do you think it is common for students to take Grammarly's feedback for granted without understanding the corrections it makes to their assignments?
5. Have there ever been any instances of Grammarly giving automated feedback that goes against the advice you typically give to tutees?
6. With the advent of ChatGPT, concerns have been raised regarding the future of the Writing Center. Do you think those same concerns should be raised for Grammarly, or is it not as severe as other AI software that exist today?



SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER IN THE WRITING CENTER

Noha Eldib

Abstract

This paper explores the challenges that students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) face in Writing Centers and the strategies that tutors can implement to better support them. Despite the growing need for inclusive tutoring practices, research on adapting Writing Centers for students with ASD is limited. This study reviews existing literature on best practices for supporting students on the spectrum and investigates how Writing Centers can address their needs. Through surveys and interviews with tutors at the American University of Sharjah (AUS) Writing Center, the study reveals that while tutors are somewhat aware of ASD, there is a lack of specific training and strategies. Findings suggest that tutors can better support students with ASD through structured instructions, sensory-friendly environments, and tailored feedback. This paper highlights the importance of tutor training to improve the effectiveness of Writing Centers in accommodating students with ASD.

Keywords: writing center, autism spectrum disorder, tutoring strategies, inclusive practices, tutor training

Imagine a student entering the Writing Center for the first time, unsure of what to expect. They approach the tutor with a nervous glance, avoiding eye contact, not because of shyness, but because they are overwhelmed by sensory input from the fluorescent lights and the noise of others in the room. They struggle to focus on the writing task and are unsure of how to express themselves clearly in this unfamiliar setting. For students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), this is often the reality they face, which makes an academic environment like the writing center intimidating instead of it being supportive. Autism spectrum disorder affects about one in 146 births in the United Arab Emirates (Virolainen et al., 2020). Individuals with ASD often experience challenges that can impact the way they learn and engage with others, including during one-on-one tutoring sessions (Van Der Steen et al., 2020).

As a tutor-in-training at the American University of Sharjah's Writing Center, I have observed how important it is for tutors to adapt their strategies to better accommodate neurodiverse students. Nonetheless, many tutors are not equipped with the knowledge or training to effectively support students with ASD. Therefore, my awareness of these gaps makes me interested in exploring how writing center tutors can adapt their tutoring strategies to support students with autism spectrum disorders. Specifically, this research will investigate how tutors can recognize traits associated with ASD, address the specific writing challenges these students face, and suggest strategies tutors can implement to encourage inclusivity and support for students with ASD.

This paper attempts to answer the following question: What strategies can be adapted at the writing center to better support students on the autism spectrum in tutoring sessions? Specifically, this research will investigate how tutors can recognize traits associated with ASD, address the specific writing challenges these students face, and suggest strategies that tutors can implement to encourage inclusivity and support for students with ASD. The purpose of my research is to find ways in which tutoring practices can be modified to effectively support students with ASD. As universities increasingly emphasize inclusivity and neurodiversity, it is important to understand how tutoring sessions can be tailored to meet the specific needs of students on the autism spectrum.

This paper explores how writing center tutors can better support students with autism spectrum disorder by recognizing their unique traits, understanding the writing challenges they face, and adapting their tutoring strategies to create a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Key Traits and Writing Challenges of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Traits of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by a wide range of traits that affect social interaction, communication, and behavior. As outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition (DSM-5), these traits include persistent difficulties with social interactions, repetitive behaviors, and restricted interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2024). Individuals with ASD often exhibit sensory sensitivities such as hypersensitivity to light and noise, which can affect their ability to focus on a typical academic setting (Van Der Steen et al., 2020).

Repetitive behaviors and strict adherence to routines are also common in individuals with ASD. For instance, a student may become distressed if a session deviates from an expected structure. In addition, challenges with verbal communication, such as difficulty clearly expressing ideas, are prevalent among individuals with ASD (Cherney, 2017). Recognizing these traits is fundamental for tutors, as they provide a better understanding of how a student with autism may approach a writing assignment or respond to feedback. Therefore, understanding these traits equips tutors with the ability to approach sessions with greater empathy and adaptability. For example, if a student struggles to maintain eye contact, a tutor should not interpret this as a lack of engagement, as it could be one of the underlying characteristics of ASD. Thus, recognizing sensory sensitivities can encourage tutors to minimize interactions during sessions.

Writing Challenges Faced by Students with Autism

Writing is a complex process that requires using cognitive, linguistic, and social skills. For students with ASD, this process can be challenging due to their difficulties with executive functioning, which includes planning, transitioning between ideas, and organizing (Asaro-Saddler, 2016). For example, a student with ASD may struggle to structure an essay because they are unable to break down the writing task into smaller, manageable components.

These difficulties are evident when students with ASD encounter open guidelines, which may feel overwhelming or ambiguous to individuals who prefer structured and explicit instructions (Zajic et al., 2016).

Sensory sensitivities can impede the writing process for many students with ASD. Jones et al. (2020) highlight that sensory processing difficulties are linked to increased stress and reduced academic performance in students with autism. In the writing center environment, factors such as the 'hum' of the air conditioner or the clicking of keyboards in the background can significantly impact the student's ability to focus. Moreover, rigid thinking patterns, which are characteristics of ASD, may cause a student to fixate on specific wording and formatting, which makes it challenging to accept broader revisions or to see alternative approaches to their work (Cherney, 2017).

Social communication difficulties also contribute to the unique challenges faced by students with ASD, as writing center sessions often rely on collaborative activities, such as brainstorming or discussing drafts. However, students with autism may find it difficult to express their ideas or to interpret a tutor's feedback as constructive (Van Der Steen et al., 2020).

Furthermore, many students with ASD have difficulties in understanding abstract concepts, which can affect their ability to review literature. This challenge may result in overly concrete essays or lacking in critical analysis. Overall, all these challenges highlight the importance of adapting tutoring strategies to accommodate the specific needs of students with autism. Without targeted support, these students may face barriers that prevent them from fully engaging with the writing process or reaching their academic potential.

Literature Review

Writing Centers and Neurodiverse Students

Writing centers aim to provide academic support, yet their ability to effectively accommodate neurodiverse students, including those with autism spectrum disorder, is still underdeveloped. Although writing centers try to adapt to individual students' needs, research highlights that typical tutoring practices do not align with the challenges of neurodiverse students (Syharat et al., 2023). These gaps highlight the need for specific strategies that better support students with ASD in the writing center.

Explicit Instruction and Scaffolding

Having a better understanding of the best practices that can be used to better support students with ASD is fundamental. Research shows that explicit instructions and scaffolding are key to supporting students with ASD in academic settings. Saad (2023) highlights how breaking down tasks into smaller steps, such as prewriting, drafting, and revising, helps students with learning difficulties stay organized and reduce the stress associated with complex assignments. For instance, tutors can guide students through brainstorming, outlining, drafting, and revising in separate stages to ensure clarity and avoid getting overwhelmed. Adcock and Chan (2022) also found that students with ASD perform better when given concrete and goal-oriented instructions. Visual supports, such as graphic organizers, further help comprehension by providing students with ASD with a better way to organize their ideas (Braun & Hughes, 2020).

Addressing Sensory Sensitivities

Sensory sensitivities are another key characteristic that impacts learning for students with autism spectrum disorder. In fact, students with ASD are more likely to experience stress and reduced performance in environments with high sensory stimulation (Mallory & Keehn, 2021). Nonetheless, writing centers often have open spaces with multiple ongoing sessions, which can overwhelm people with ASD and make their experience at the writing center uncomfortable and distressing. Research highlights the effectiveness of offering quiet and low stimulation spaces to encourage an autism-friendly learning environment (McAllister & Sloan, 2016). Additionally, incorporating assistive technology such as speech-to-text tools or online resources can reduce sensory demands and help students concentrate in class (McNicholl et al., 2021).

Feedback Delivery for Students with ASD

Feedback is a fundamental component of writing center sessions, but for students with ASD, the way feedback is delivered can significantly affect its effectiveness. Vague suggestions may lead to confusion or frustration, as students with autism often interpret feedback literally (Tay & Kee, 2019). Positive reinforcement also plays a key role in motivating students with ASD.

Research shows that feedback highlighting strengths alongside areas for improvement helps students with ASD feel more included and confident in classrooms.

Training and Preparedness of Writing Center Tutors

Research shows that despite all these strategies that can be applied in writing centers to better support students with ASD, many writing center tutors feel underprepared to work with neurodiverse students. Most tutors lack formal training on neurodiversity and rely on generalized practices that may not meet the needs of students with autism (Cherney, 2017). Thus, tutor training can significantly enhance tutors' confidence and effectiveness (Cherney, 2017).

Gaps in Existing Research

Although existing research provides valuable information about how to support students who are on the autism spectrum, there are still significant gaps. Most studies focus on classroom settings, with limited attention to the specific dynamics of writing centers, an environment that heavily relies on collaboration and communication. Additionally, there is a lack of research on how these strategies can be implemented in culturally diverse contexts, such as writing centers in the Middle East, more specifically, the United Arab Emirates. These gaps highlight the need for localized studies to explore how writing centers can effectively adapt their practices to support students with autism spectrum disorder.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining a survey of Writing Center tutors and a semi-structured interview with the director of the Academic Support Center (ASC) at the American University of Sharjah (AUS).

Survey

A survey was distributed to Writing Center tutors to assess their familiarity with ASD traits and their experiences tutoring students with autism. The survey was conducted using Google Forms and consisted of two questions:

1. How familiar are you with autism spectrum disorder and the traits associated with it?
2. Have you tutored a student you suspected or knew was on the autism spectrum?

A total of thirteen tutors completed the survey. Google Forms automatically summarized the data into pie charts, showing the distribution of responses for each question. This summary provided an overview of tutors' familiarity and practical experience with ASD.

Interview

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the Director of the Academic Support Center (ASC). The ASC is a university resource designed to support students facing academic challenges. It also arranges academic accommodations for students with disabilities that impact their performance, to ensure they have equitable opportunities for success. During the interview, the following topics were discussed:

1. Prevalence of students with autism spectrum disorder who visit the ASC
2. Common challenges faced by students with ASD
3. Academic accommodations provided at AUS to support these students
4. Recommendations for strategies to implement in the AUS Writing Center to better help students with ASD

Notes were taken during the interview to document the discussion, as the conversation was not audio-recorded. These notes provided a foundation for identifying key points related to supporting students with ASD in the Writing Center.

Findings

Survey

The survey responses revealed a range of familiarity among Writing Center tutors regarding autism spectrum disorder and its traits. Out of the thirteen respondents, six tutors, or 46%, identified as being moderately familiar with ASD, which indicated that they had some understanding of the traits but lacked in-depth knowledge (Appendix A). Three tutors, or 23%, were slightly familiar, suggesting only a surface-level awareness, while two tutors, or 15%, stated they were not familiar with ASD traits at all. Two tutors, making up the remaining 15%, reported being very familiar with ASD, demonstrating confidence in identifying key traits.

When asked about their practical experience, 92% of the tutors, or twelve respondents, indicated that they had not knowingly tutored a student with ASD (Appendix). Only one tutor reported suspecting that they had worked with a student who might be on the spectrum. These results highlight a general lack of direct experience and limited understanding of ASD among Writing Center tutors.

Interview

The interview with the director of the Academic Support Center (ASC) provided more information about the challenges faced by students with ASD and potential strategies to enhance Writing Center support. According to the director, approximately 22–24% of the students who seek assistance from the ASC have ASD. These students often face significant academic challenges, such as difficulties with managing strict schedules, adapting to changes, handling time management, as well as discomfort in engaging with unfamiliar individuals. While these challenges are not exclusive to students with ASD, they tend to manifest more among this group.

The ASC offers a range of accommodations tailored to the specific needs of students with ASD. These accommodations include additional time during exams, access to alternative testing spaces to minimize distractions, and the use of assistive technologies such as speech-to-text tools. Students are also allowed to take photographs or make audio recordings during lectures to help their academic performance. When asked about strategies that could benefit the Writing Center, the director emphasized the importance of creating a quiet and separate space to reduce sensory overload for students with ASD. They also suggested incorporating assistive technologies, such as tools that convert speech to text, to facilitate the writing process. Additionally, the director recommended that online sessions include clear guidelines, such as requiring cameras to be on and encouraging eye contact, to provide structure and promote better engagement.

Discussion

This study sought to answer the question: What strategies can be adapted at the Writing Center to better support students on the autism spectrum in tutoring sessions? The results highlight a critical need for greater awareness and targeted strategies to address the unique challenges faced by students with autism spectrum disorder. The survey findings indicated a lack of familiarity with ASD traits among tutors, with many reporting limited understanding and little to no experience working with students who are on the autism spectrum disorder. This highlights a gap in preparedness that aligns with previous research, which suggests that many tutoring practices fail to meet the needs of neurodiverse students (Cherney, 2017).

The gap in familiarity suggests a need for training to equip tutors with the skills and confidence necessary to engage with students on the autism spectrum. Incorporating ASD-related training into existing tutor development programs could address this issue, which will provide tutors with tools to recognize key traits and strategies to adapt their tutoring practices.

Insights from the ASC director offered valuable perspectives on the specific challenges students with ASD face, such as difficulty adapting to changes, managing time, and navigating social interactions. These challenges tend to be more pronounced among students with ASD, which makes it necessary to have tailored approaches for them. The accommodations currently provided by the ASC such as extended testing time, alternative testing spaces, and the use of assistive technology serve as a useful model for how the Writing Center can adapt its practices to effectively support these students.

The findings also revealed that students with ASD would benefit from a more sensory-friendly environment during tutoring sessions. The ASC director highlighted the importance of creating quiet spaces and using assistive technologies, which is supported by existing literature (McAllister & Sloan, 2016; McNicholl et al., 2021). These strategies could inform Writing Center practices by addressing the sensory sensitivities learning style of students with ASD. For instance, setting up a separate, low-stimulation area within the Writing Center could help students with ASD focus better during sessions. Such a space would minimize distractions and sensory overload caused by the typical over stimulating environment of the Writing Center. Quiet rooms or spaces with less visual and auditory stimulation would be beneficial for students who experience sensory sensitivities, which will ensure they feel more comfortable and are able to concentrate on their writing tasks.

Similarly, incorporating tools like speech-to-text software or graphic organizers could simplify the writing process for students struggling with executive functioning challenges. Assistive technologies that convert speech to text would support students who find it difficult to type or organize their thoughts in writing. This would provide a more accessible and supportive environment for students with ASD who may struggle with these steps of the writing process.

Tutors can also offer visual aids, such as step-by-step guides to break down the writing process into manageable tasks, which can help reduce students' cognitive load and help them stay organized.

The findings also highlight the importance of clear and explicit communication. Tutors' lack of familiarity with ASD traits may lead to misinterpretations of student behavior, such as difficulty maintaining eye contact or adhering to feedback. As Van Der Steen et al. (2020) argued, understanding these traits is crucial for enhancing empathy and adaptability in tutoring sessions. A student's avoidance of eye contact or preference for sitting in a certain position should not be misread as disengagement. Instead, tutors should recognize these as potential indicators of ASD, which require a more sensitive and patient approach. Tutors should also make sure that their feedback is clear, constructive, and avoid vague suggestions, as students with ASD tend to interpret feedback literally (Tay & Kee, 2019).

Moreover, structured and predictable session formats, as suggested by the ASC director, could help reduce students' anxiety about unexpected changes or unstructured tasks. For instance, tutors could establish a clear agenda at the start of each session. In fact, beginning sessions by outlining what will be covered can create a sense of stability for students with ASD, which will lower cognitive load and allow them to focus on the writing process itself. These steps would encourage students to engage with their writing without feeling overwhelmed by unpredictable dynamics. To further support inclusivity, online tutoring sessions should be structured in a way to create a comforting environment for students with ASD. This could include requiring cameras to be on to maintain eye contact, which aligns with the director's recommendation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has highlighted the importance of adapting Writing Center practices to better support students on the autism spectrum. Many writing center tutors are not familiar with ASD traits which affects their ability to effectively support these students. The findings suggest that creating structured, low-stimulation environments, integrating assistive technologies, and providing clear, direct communication are important strategies for helping students with ASD.

Implementing these strategies could significantly enhance the inclusivity of Writing Center sessions and provide a better learning experience for students on the spectrum.

However, the study has some limitations. First, the sample size of tutors surveyed was small, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the research only focused on tutors' perspectives and did not include direct feedback from students with ASD. Future research should explore the experiences of students with autism in Writing Center settings, examine the effectiveness of the identified strategies in practice, as well as have a bigger sample size to ensure generalizability. Despite these limitations, the study offers important findings on how Writing Centers can better support students with ASD and highlights areas for further exploration to refine and implement these strategies effectively.

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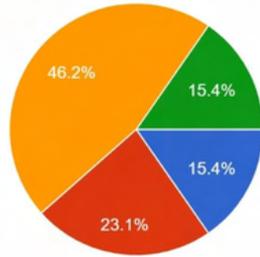
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Appendix A

How familiar are you with autism spectrum disorder and the traits associated with it?

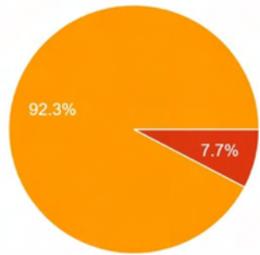
13 responses



- Not familiar at all
- Slightly familiar (I have heard of it but cannot describe the traits)
- Moderately familiar (I have some understanding of the traits but not in depth knowledge)
- Very familiar (I can confidently identify key traits of autism)

Have you tutored a student you suspected or knew was on the autism spectrum?

13 responses



- Yes, I knew they were on the spectrum.
- Yes, I suspected they might be on the spectrum.
- No, I have not tutored a student with ASD (to my knowledge).

OUR GRADUATING TUTORS

Jude Saleh

While the sense of community that the Writing Center brings is amongst the most joyful parts of tutoring, it also carries a bittersweet truth: Every semester, we are forced to say goodbye to some of our most skilled tutors. The Writing Center is all too familiar with farewells, but this year was especially difficult as 15 of our tutors graduated, each taking with them semesters of experience, collaboration, and the memories of the tens—if not hundreds—of tutees whose writing they helped refine. But rather than dwell on the goodbyes, we take a moment to recognize the imprint that their passion has left on the ever-growing quilt of the Writing Center's history.

This year's graduating tutors come from 9 different majors in 3 different colleges: engineering; arts and sciences; and architecture, art, and design. However, the one thing that unites them—the stitching, if you will—is their love for reading, writing, and tutoring. In fact, this has been a sentiment expressed in *all* of our tutors' bios published on the Writing Center website; for example, Manal had expressed that she is “excited to provide company and community to her peers wherever they're at in their writing journeys.” Likewise, Rose said that she has been “passionate about helping her classmates with their writing since high school.” Similarly, Berra wrote that she “loves reading books, meeting new people, and helping others.” For this reason, many of our graduating tutors were involved in various other roles at the Writing Center, including the Write & Connect Club, delivering workshops, organizing events, and editing the previous issues of this journal.

So, it is easy to see that it is this very passion that has brought the many heartfelt thanks to fruition and upheld the Writing Center's commitment to excellence. And if the impact of a tutor's work is best seen in the voices of their tutees, then it would only be right to let the tutees speak for themselves. Below are a very few snippets of the kind feedback we received throughout this year:

- “The tutor can't be funnier. Clear with explanation and advice.”
- “It was very helpful and [the tutor] helped me with exactly what I needed and more.”
- “Thank you sooo much [tutor]! Let it be known that the sessions benefitted me a lot.”
- “The tutors are extremely professional yet friendly which makes them really approachable.”
- “Absolutely amazing, [the tutor] was lovely and helped me throughout in bits and pieces at every stage answering all my questions.”

Finally, to our graduating tutors: thank you. Thank you for bringing your different academic backgrounds, different languages, different goals, and passion for writing and tutoring to the Writing Center. Because, in the end, it is the differences that make patchworks beautiful to look at, not the similarities.

This year, we proudly celebrate the graduation of 15 of our talented tutors: **Jana Samy**, graduate of Mass Communication with a concentration in Journalism and a minor in Theatre. **Berra Sunnetcioglu**, graduate of Psychology with a minor in Arabic Language and Literature, and **Huda Imran**, graduate of English Language and Literature. **Muhammad Ahmer** and **Lodan Elmugamer**, both graduates of Computer Science, with Lodan also earning double minors in Data Science and Biology. **Nour Eltabakh**, graduate of Architecture with a minor in Business Administration. **Niveditha Parthasarathy**, graduate of Physics, and **Noha Eldib**, graduate of Psychology. **Nour Mohamed**, graduate of Psychology with a minor in Philosophy, and, likewise, **Aysha Bint Hashim**, graduate of Psychology who also received a minor in Data Science. **Yamna Azim** and **Jude Saleh**, both graduates of Biology, with Jude also minoring in English Language. Last—but definitely not least—**Manal Nadeem**, graduate of International Studies, and **Rose Falou** and **Rahaf Amasaib**, both graduates of Industrial Engineering.

We wish you all the best and hope to see you again at the Writing Center! Keep an eye out for a potential alumni tutor gathering!



GET TO KNOW US

Huda Imran

The AUS Writing Center is a student-led entity at the American University of Sharjah committed to the development of students' writing. Under the tutelage of Dr. Maria Eleftheriou, Director of the AUS Writing Center, tutors conduct one-on-one sessions with students, both in-person and online, which focus on guidance and facilitation throughout all stages of the writing process. These sessions are not just limited to the exploration of academic, university-level writing, but rather take a holistic approach that includes creative writing, professional endeavours, and any other personal projects that students may be pursuing. Using a non-directive approach, tutors encourage tutees to think critically and build their confidence with writing so they can carry these teachings with them beyond the walls of the Writing Center. We aim to build independent, self-assured writers that enjoy all aspects of the writing process, even those that initially seem to be difficult. We believe that, with the right support and commitment from tutors, both the communal and independent aspects of the writing process can flourish simultaneously, which is important when encouraging a culture/society that values writing.

Alongside these one-on-one sessions, the AUS Writing Center also organizes writing workshops, events, competitions, and calls for submissions to the annual Writing Center journal, Inkblot. In addition, the Write and Connect Club, as part of the Writing Center, facilitates connections between tutors and students year-round through various exciting events. The Write and Connect Club, much like the Writing Center itself, aims to foster a passion for writing in the AUS community and encourage the development of meaningful connections between students, tutors, and faculty. Reach out to us at writingcenter@aus.edu, visit our website at www.aus.mywconline.com, or come say hello at LIB-019.

We wish you success in your current and future writing endeavors!

