# Managing an English Writing Lab During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many educational institutions to switch from classroom-based to distance or online-based instruction in synchronous, asynchronous, or mixed mode. In contrast, writing centers provide tutoring sessions on demand, usually to individual students on a one-on-one basis. Therefore, writing centers need to find ways to enable students to make individual reservations, and to conduct distance tutoring sessions effectively. The Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College (HGUJC) Writing Lab addressed the first issue by adopting an online reservation system that allowed students to make reservations, and the second one by providing synchronous tutoring sessions via Zoom, which offered the best way to replicate the face-to-face practice for the tutors and students. Participating in online sessions was found to be more flexible and convenient. However, it also formed a technological barrier that had an impact on access to the Writing Lab and on building rapport.

## 1. Introduction

The Department of English at Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College (HGUJC) introduced an English Writing Lab in 2005 to provide learning support to students as part of their English studies. Students benefit from receiving one-on-one and face-to-face writing assistance from the tutors in 30-minute sessions. The number of students using the Writing Lab has increased year on year, and the lab has been managed and utilized steadily.

However, due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to rethink the management of our face-to-face provision. In 2020, we therefore built an online reservation system and moved our face-to-face Writing Lab sessions online, with short preparation time. It was a very difficult year to get the online Writing Lab up and running. In this report, we illustrate how we managed the transition from a face-to-face to an online Writing Lab and we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the online Writing Lab from the perspectives of the tutors, the staff, and the students.

## 2. Literature Review

Writing, especially academic writing, is an integral part of higher education, and as such it has been extensively covered in the literature. At this level, writing is a prolonged process that involves steps such as prewriting research, preparing an outline, drafts, proofreading, etc. For each of these steps, writing tutors can offer invaluable assistance and feedback (Rafoth, 2010). During tutoring sessions, the tutor and the tutee can discuss various aspects of writing, including the thesis, organization, coherence, grammar, punctuation, style, clarity, etc. (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004, p. 116). For this purpose, universities typically create and use writing centers or labs based on face-to-face sessions, where a tutor works directly with a student or a group of students. This approach allows

for immediate feedback and communication between the two sides. Arranging face-to-face contact is well established and regarded as the "gold standard for teaching academic writing" (Angelov & Ganobcsik-Williams, 2015). Therefore, it sets the bar high for the synchronous and asynchronous instruction methods.

2.1 Face-to-face tutorials

One-on-one writing tutorials are particularly beneficial to English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, who might need help with lower-level concerns such as grammar and vocabulary, and who also might be less familiar with the typical overall paragraph structure, register, or cohesion that are expected in English writing. In The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors (2006), Ryan and Zimmerelli outline rules of successful tutoring for ESL students and stress face-to-face communication as the key to breaking through the culture barrier; for example, they advise that the tutor should "watch people's expressions, and ask questions to see if they comprehended your explanations." In Japan and other countries with languages other than English, writing centers help non-native speakers write in English for a wide range of purposes, such as academic writing, presentations, application letters, etc. (Johnston et al., 2008). The writing centers enable colleges to "provide learning support tailored to the needs of students at various levels" (Morikoshi, 2008).

2.2 Remote tutorials

Remote or distance instruction, also called "e-tutoring" or Network-Based Language Teaching (NBLT), can be provided in either synchronous (real-time) mode, asynchronous mode, or a mix of the two. The differences between face-to-face and online tutoring have also been studied. Kastman Breuch et al. (2000) point out the different requirements that the online environment poses for tutors and writing centers, such as "appreciating text-only environments,

developing procedures for responding online, and creating appropriate roles for online tutors." Denis et al. (2004) further conclude that e-tutors should be trained to "manage the interactions [...] in the e-learning environment and [...] improve the quality of e-learning."

2.3 Synchronous tutorials

Synchronous, or real-time, tutoring in the context of remote instruction relies on technologies that allow for direct communication over the internet. In the 21st century, online video conferences came to the fore as the leading method of providing synchronous instruction. Real-time communication allows for immediate interactive feedback on par with that of real classroom settings (Steeples et al., 2002). It "offers opportunities for dialogue between tutors and writers, allowing them to build a relationship, clarify misunderstandings, and collaboratively create knowledge." In addition to video and voice transmission, some platforms allow screen sharing of files, presentations, and information exchange on a digital whiteboard (Ng, 2007). These features are particularly useful in writing tutorial sessions. Brown (2012) lists communication channels, managing appointments, tutor training, and tutoring flexibility as the key considerations for running a successful online synchronous writing center. The effectiveness of synchronous instruction via video conferencing has been the subject of numerous studies. A comparative study of face-to-face and synchronous online writing tutorials conducted at New York University's Opportunity Programs found no significant differences between the two, especially regarding the latter's effectiveness and student satisfaction (Bandi-Rao, 2009). The study found that students also appreciated online tutorials' flexibility and convenience, which compares favorably to real-time instruction via text-only (Robertshaw, 2003). However, synchronous online

instruction depends on the sufficient mastery of new technology to be effective (Peachey, 2017). In another study, students' preferences for either synchronous or asynchronous instruction were analyzed and found to be determined mainly by the students' learning styles, that is, some students prefer more interaction offered by synchronous tutorials, while others prefer more autonomy provided by asynchronous tutorials (Beyth-Marom et al., 2005). Another aspect of synchronous instruction in general is the slightly lower level of interactions between the student and the teacher, the student and the content, and, in particular, between the students themselves (Anderson, 2003). One way to improve student engagement and student–teacher interactions in the online learning environment is by building rapport between the teacher and the student (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Tutors are advised to "set a friendly, informal tone at the start of the tutorial, thus beginning the process of building an interpersonal relationship with the writer" (Cooper et al., 2000).

2.4 Asynchronous tutorials

Asynchronous, or non-real time, tutorials can be conducted via emails, forums, or Learning Management System (LMS) platforms such as Moodle. In other words, the tutor and the student do not need to meet "face-to-face" either physically or online. Tutoring sessions take the form of written correspondence, in which the tutor and the student communicate and collaborate on the latter's work by sending the text in question first, followed by feedback, questions, etc. Coogan (1995) describes the process as a "discussion in writing." Similarly, Angelov & Ganobcsik-Williams (2015) see it as "text-bound dialogue." In literature, asynchronous tutorials are considered as a last resort option if face-to-face or synchronous sessions are not viable (Castner, 2000). They are criticized for reducing interactions between the student and the tutor to

communication "through a faceless, expressionless computer screen" (Carlson & Apperson-Williams, 2000). Written communication lacks non-verbal elements of working face-to-face, such as gestures, facial expressions, and enunciations that [make] us feel alive and energized (Rafoth, 2010). It also significantly draws out the process to hours at best, and to days, weeks, or even months at worst (Coogan, 1995). However, the asynchronous approach also has clear benefits, by freeing both sides from strict time and space constraints and by "making tutorial assistance available to many students who might otherwise be unable to take advantage of it" (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2006). Students "with less traditional schedules" can still receive required support, and both the tutor and the student are afforded more privacy and more time to read the text and give it its due consideration. Coogan (1995) sees it as an opportunity to be more frank and to "put emphasis of tutoring [...] on the writing itself." Correspondence also creates a digital "paper trail" that can act as a reference for the future (Hewett, 2015).

Synchronous and asynchronous modes can be successfully combined. Alqadoumi's research (2012) studied the effectiveness of providing asynchronous feedback first, followed by a synchronous session to further discuss the provided comments and concerns and answer any subsequent questions from the tutee.

2.5 Providing writing tutorials in specific circumstances

The conventional education system is typically based on providing scheduled instruction, face-to-face, i.e., where both the instructor and the student or students are physically present in the same classroom or workshop space. However, in some circumstances, there are constraints that require other solutions. Angelocci et al. (2008) describe how universities in New Orleans adapted to teaching online in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, to provide access to education for students who were unable to reach the campus.

Another example specific to writing centers is the Effective Writing Center at the University of Maryland, which operates exclusively online and uses multimedia tools to cater to military students who may be widely scattered around the country and around the world (Gallagher et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic that enveloped the globe prompted most educational institutions around the world to adopt similar measures for delivering the curriculum, either with one-way technologies such as TV and radio broadcasts, or by using more interactive electronic and communication technologies that rely on Internet connectivity (Chabbott & Sinclair, 2020). A meta-study analyzed higher education responses to COVID-19 and found a variety of strategies for delivering curricula, ranging from social distancing strategies to going fully online (Crawford et al., 2020). However, tutoring centers, whether for language or other types of tutoring (Johns & Mills, 2020), require solutions that enable two-way communication between the student and the tutor. At the New Jersey Institute of Technology, face-to-face sessions were suspended during the pandemic and tutoring services were moved online (NJIT, 2020), using a mixture of synchronous or semi-synchronous technologies, such as Google Docs, Google Chat, and Google Hangouts. Perez-Jorge et al. (2020) conducted a comprehensive comparative study of various modes of instruction, including synchronous (via WhatsApp) and asynchronous (via email) during the pandemic and found that the synchronous instruction "produced the most general satisfaction in the students." In Japan, academic writing centers broadly adopted online systems in order to provide tutoring to students. Sophia University offers only Zoom tutorials (Sophia U, 2020), while Waseda University provides both face-to-face and online sessions (Waseda, 2020). Globally, Zoom was a clear winner with 78% of educational institutions choosing the platform to provide online tutoring (Johns & Mills, 2020).

2.6 Reservation systems

An efficient reservation system is crucial to the smooth running of a writing center. Writing Centers have adopted different systems for scheduling tutoring sessions. The New Jersey Institute of Technology opted for their own WCOnline scheduling system (NJIT, 2020). South Dakota State University chose ConnectState for scheduling appointments (SDState, 2020). The Waseda University Academic Writing Program has an in-house "MyWaseda" system for booking sessions (Waseda, 2020). Similarly, Sophia University uses a public access Excel file with information on available slots, from which students can then choose two most convenient ones and apply for them online using an in-house "Tutorial Booking Form" (Sophia, 2020).

3. Methodology

In this study, interviews and self-administered questionnaires were used as the study methodology. The three tutors provided their answers by email in the form of a self-administered questionnaire in June 2021. The second author interviewed the staff member and five former students who were second-year students in 2020. That is, the students experienced face-to-face Writing Lab sessions in 2019, as well as online sessions in 2020. These five former students were selected through the second author's network. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from May to June in 2021 in order to explore participants' perceptions of the Writing Lab. Each interview took about 15-30 minutes. Furthermore, for the total number of students visiting the Writing Lab, quantitative data was collected from the Writing Lab records for the years 2018-2020.

4. Managing the Writing Lab
4.1 General description of the Writing Lab operations

The Writing Lab operates Monday to Friday for about 10–12 weeks each semester. Since the Writing Lab was established, writing support has been provided in a room belonging to the department. Although most users are HGUJC students, English major students of Hokusei Gakuen University can and do use the Writing Lab frequently. Currently, HGUJC employs three experienced English teachers as writing tutors and one Japanese member of staff as the manager to run the Writing Lab. To use the lab, students are asked to schedule an appointment in advance. If there is room in the schedule, walk-ins are also welcomed. Students may ask a variety of questions regarding English writing, and they may bring their essays, reports, draft speeches, and any kind of written text to the lab. The tutors help students improve their writing skills. Each session is 20–30 minutes in length and conducted in English.

The lab mainly provides writing support, but the tutors also act as conversation partners and mentors, for example by talking about a wide variety of topics in English, helping practice English exam interviews, etc.

4.2 Managing the Writing Lab during the COVID-19 pandemic

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Writing Lab provided tutorial sessions in 2020 exclusively online. The tutors worked remotely from home, whereas the staff member worked mainly at the campus. The students predominantly reserved and participated in the sessions remotely from home. They could also participate in the tutorials from computer labs at the campus. Before opening the online Writing Lab to students in May 2020, the staff and tutors several times tested and practiced logging into the system, checking the appointment schedule, and using Zoom functions, such as screen sharing and making annotations to acquaint themselves with the new software and to ensure smooth

running in the actual tutorial sessions.

4.2.1 Online reservation system

Originally, students visited the Writing Lab to book a session in advance by signing their names on the reservation sheet. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, an online reservation system was created utilizing a free online application. Initially, reservations were made via Office 365, to which all students have access. They could choose a date and time, and input both their email and the Writing Lab email to make a session reservation. If done correctly, the reservation details would be automatically sent to the Google Calendar set up for the Writing Lab. However, a significant number of students forgot to add the Writing Lab email, so the session did not appear in Google Calendar. Subsequently, a new system was implemented using the online reservation system AirReserve, which both students and Writing Lab staff can see and edit.

Then, an introduction to the Writing Lab and a video on how to make a reservation were posted on the Moodle page, which all English-major students could access. After watching the uploaded video, most students were able to make reservations and start receiving support from the tutors.

4.2.2 Online sessions

Online tutoring sessions are conducted via video conference software Zoom. Apart from the first time slot in the morning, which is 20 minutes long, each session is allotted 30 minutes. Typical tutoring sessions involve either an individual or group writing task. Students can also use the Writing Lab for conversation practice. In a typical session, the student wants to receive assistance with or feedback for their written assignment. The system described above is generally the same for face-to-face and online sessions.

4.4.2.1 Before the session

In the face-to-face system, students can either book a session in

advance or drop in if no one else is using the Writing Lab at the moment. In the online system, students should book a session in advance, at least one hour before their preferred time slot, but drop-ins are also possible and allowed. Tutors work in two shifts. Before each shift, the tutor logs in to four platforms: Moodle, which acts as the central information and link hub; AirReserve, from which they can check current bookings for the day and see the students' names and numbers; Google Drive, where they input completed session data; and, finally, Zoom. The Writing Lab administrator, who is the host, then makes the tutor a co-host. This enables the tutor to admit the students to Zoom meetings for the duration of their sessions.

4.4.2.2 During the session

For a writing task, the tutor asks the student to use the "share screen" function in Zoom, which enables the tutor to see the contents of the assignment directly from the student's computer or tablet. If that fails, the student can also send the file via the Zoom chat function to the tutor. Generally, the student is in control of the screen and only he or she can edit the text directly. This is in line with the practice outlined by Ryan et al. (2006), who write, "as a general rule, keep the writer in control of the computer and thus in control of the text." The tutor can communicate throughout the session with the student and offer feedback and advice in a variety of ways: via voice, video, and the text chat. In individual sessions, students leave their microphone and camera on, but in group sessions, non-active students often mute their microphones until it is their turn. In group task sessions, members of the group can log in to Zoom together and either choose one person who will share the screen with the entire assignment project, or the individual group members may choose to share their screens in turns and work on their individual input directly.

In conversation practice sessions, either side may choose to share

their screen in order to share online resources, such as relevant websites, pictures, dictionary entries, etc., depending on the topic.

The tutor may also use the "Annotate" tool within Zoom to point out specific grammatical, spelling, and vocabulary errors, and to offer synonyms, definitions, and examples, among other possibilities. However, annotations are added to an additional layer on the screen, rather than to the document. For longer texts that require scrolling, the annotations will remain in the same position on the screen rather than move along with the corresponding part of the text. Annotations that are no longer relevant can be erased by the tutor or the student. Students can record the session as well as save the annotated documents as screenshots. Any screen annotations are automatically deleted and cannot be retrieved after the student stops sharing their screen. That is why they are advised to either save annotated documents, make the necessary changes during the session directly in the document, or take notes on paper and choose how to apply the received feedback later. Once the student is satisfied with the feedback, or the allotted session time has elapsed, the student saves the relevant changes, stops screen sharing, and logs out of Zoom.

4.4.2.3 After the session

The tutor can then write up the session details in Google Drive online, including the date, time, type of session (writing or conversation), provided feedback, and any other additional notes that might be relevant for the next session. On busy days with back-to-back sessions, three additional ten-minute slots every one or two hours are allotted for data input. The student can further apply the received feedback to their document on their own or schedule another session.

5. Findings

Although the online Writing Lab was introduced at orientation, the total number of lab users was low in 2020 compared to previous years. The total number of users was 1450 in 2018 and 1462 in 2019, compared to 626 in 2020 (Figure 1).
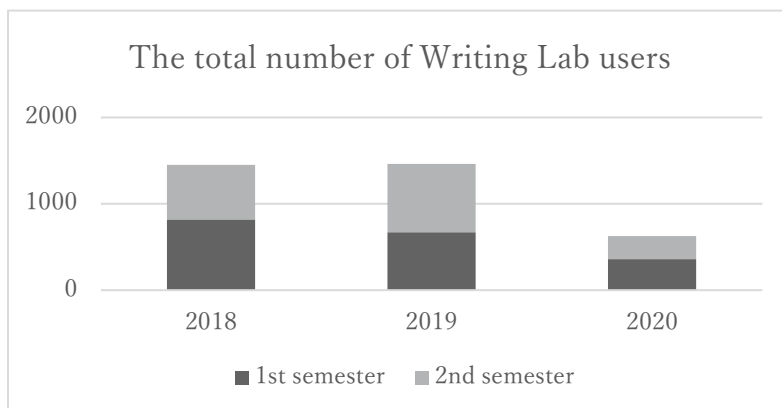


*Figure 1.* The total number of writing lab users in 2018-2020

In the previous years a large portion of the Writing Lab users came for speaking practice, whereas in 2020 it was almost exclusively used for writing tutorials (581 writing and 45 speaking users in 2020) (Figure 2).
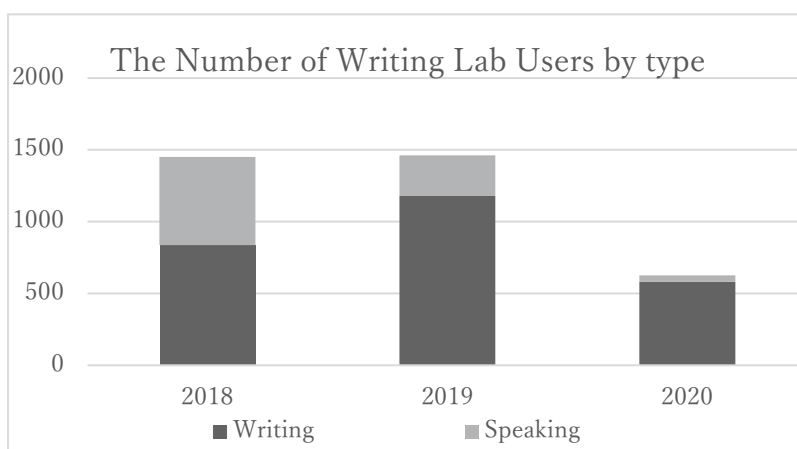


*Figure 2.* The number of wrii9tng lab users by type in 2018-2020

5.1 Tutors' perspectives

The Writing Lab employs three writing tutors with over ten years of experience in face-to-face tutoring sessions and one year of tutoring online. This experience allows them to form and share their unique perspectives on the merits and drawbacks of both approaches. The tutors were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (very good) both the face-to-face and online Writing Lab tutoring sessions in terms of ease of use, effectiveness, communication, rapport, and managing of reservations. Additionally, the tutors were asked for their general assessment of the Writing Lab's response to the COVID-19 situation, the perceived benefits and weaknesses, and any other suggestions or comments on how to improve online tutorials in the future. Their opinions are summarized as follows.

5.1.1 Ease of conducting tutoring sessions face-to-face and online

The tutors rated the ease of conducting the face-to-face tutoring sessions highly (on average, 4.33 points out of 5), especially the ease of communication.

Online sessions were considered as "similar to face-to-face provided there aren't any technical issues" caused by connection failures or lack of familiarity with the technology. Overall, the tutors found the online sessions to be easier to conduct from home and for students to take part in without the need to be physically present at the campus.

5.1.2 Effectiveness of conducting tutoring sessions face-to-face and online

The tutors rated the effectiveness of conducting face-to-face tutoring sessions very highly (on average, 4.67 out of 5), especially the ease of ensuring that necessary corrections were made. While online sessions offered easier access to online dictionaries, examples, and other relevant information, overall, the tutors noticed they have somewhat less direct control over the results. As one tutor commented, "Less hands-on = less effective."

5.1.3 Communication during conducting tutoring sessions face-to-face and online

The tutors rated the communication during face-to-face tutoring sessions very highly (on average, 4.67 out of 5), pointing out the ability to communicate both verbally and non-verbally. As one tutor commented, it is a "[n]atural way of interacting. Easy to notice and respond to verbal and nonverbal cues."

Communication in online sessions was rated as somewhat worse, due to a number of factors, such as listening comprehension and concentration problems, as well as to the lack of non-verbal cues, which, however, may be easily compensated for by written communication. As one tutor pointed out, "Online sessions tend to rely more on written communication via chat and annotation functions, as voice can be muffled and body language is limited."

5.1.4 Rapport with students in tutoring sessions face-to-face and online

The tutors rated the ease of building rapport with students during face-to-face tutoring sessions very highly (on average, 5 out of 5), since the sessions allow for more personal contact. In contrast, online sessions felt somewhat less personal, where students seemed reduced to just names, numbers, and faces on the screen. The tutors noticed "Less familiarity and an inability to read in-person cues." On the other hand, students could feel more relaxed in their own homes, and therefore, according to one tutor, "good rapport might have developed even quicker."

5.1.5 Managing session reservations face-to-face and online

The tutors rated the ease of managing reservations for face-to-face tutoring sessions highly (4.33 out of 5), while pointing out a few problems, such as double-bookings and no-shows. In contrast, they found the system of managing online session reservations much

better, as it prevented double bookings and significantly reduced the number of no-shows.

## 5.2 The benefits and the disadvantages of conducting online sessions

The tutors found online sessions to be more flexible and much more convenient, ergo less stressful or wasteful. They also found they can "access more information for the student" online. The tutors noticed that technical problems can make sessions harder, while the technology itself can be distractive, and can isolate students from each other and impede mutual assistance and collaboration. Students may need some assistance with the software, either in the form of lessons or via group sessions in which they would be able to help each other.

## 5.3 The overall assessment of the Writing Lab's response to COVID-19

Overall, the tutors found online sessions to be comparable to face-to-face sessions. They are much more convenient, easier to conduct and manage, but somewhat less effective, making it harder to communicate and build rapport. However, the differences are only slight.

## 5.4 Staff's perspectives

The Writing Lab staff has been managing the lab for more than ten years and is responsible for daily management and taking care of everyday interactions with students and tutors. Since any budget for installing an online reservation system is not available, the staff explored free applications and established a new online reservation system. In addition, many management tasks also became available online, such as Writing Lab Moodle page, which illustrates how to use the lab and announcements from the lab, and the online Writing Lab Log, which records the session details by tutors.

Seeing the interactions between tutors and students and managing the lab every day, the staff member indicates some merits

of the online Writing Lab. The online reservation system is convenient for the staff, students, and tutors, and also allows them to check the session schedule online, anytime and anywhere. It is particularly good for students, because they can cancel sessions online, which prevents "no shows." The staff can now upload information and announcement on the Writing Lab Moodle page. The staff mentioned positively that the online options are more convenient, because most of the lab practices became available online.

However, disadvantages were also pointed out. The staff indicated Wi-Fi connections and technical problems are the main concerns when managing the online lab. If a student is not familiar with Zoom and its functions, the time for an actual writing lab session is shortened. Some students get nervous when tutors repeat questions due to Wi-Fi problem. Some students are passive and some are not cooperative, such as, for example, by turning off their cameras even though the lab requires the students to turn on their cameras.

The staff believes that reservations should be made online from now on, but face-to-face writing lab sessions are the ideal. The face-to-face lab provides students with more chances to stop by and make a great use of the lab. Students are more likely to use face-to-face sessions. It is easier for students to come and go in their free time. The hurdle to use the service will be lowered and it will be made easier for them.

5.5 Students' perspectives

Most English majors have positive feelings about having a writing lab program, based on the survey evaluation the department conducted. However, to understand the online Writing Lab operation during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, five students who had experienced both face-to-face and online Writing Lab sessions were

interviewed in May 2021.

After experiencing the online Writing Lab sessions, the students concluded that having a hybrid Writing Lab (online and face-to-face sessions) was ideal, though each student had her own preferred format. Three students preferred face-to-face sessions, while the other two students supported online sessions. Therefore, we cannot simply say that the Writing Lab will return completely to face-to-face sessions after the pandemic problem is solved. These students described both the benefits and the difficulties of online and face-to-face Writing Lab sessions.

According to the students interviewed in this study, face-to-face sessions have several benefits for them. Visiting the Writing Lab was a fun experience for the students, because they could meet tutors from different countries and talk not only about English writing but also about many other topics. The Writing Lab was a place where they could meet a variety of people and "Englishes," and where they enjoyed learning and using English. It is an interesting and meaningful experience for students to meet tutors face-to-face and enjoy some small talk with them. The students recalled that they had a good time during face-to-face sessions, because they were able to learn many English expressions. Visiting the Lab with friends, they talked excitedly in English. On the other hand, two students become a little nervous when visiting the Lab, since they feel pressured to talk to tutors one-on-one, and they worry about what they will do when they do not understand.

Based on the students' comments, online sessions also have both benefits and issues. The students perceived that online sessions are very convenient. One reason is that students can make use of Writing Lab sessions at their own convenience, and they do not have to go to the campus. Another reason is that sharing screens is very convenient. It is easy to see their writing documents on the shared

screen. It is also much easier and better than bringing a paper document and sharing it with a tutor during face-to-face sessions. The tutors also showed online information, such as an online dictionary, on the shared screen, which was very effective for students to understand. The students pointed out that it is easy to revise their documents on the shared screen and save them so that they can take the revised document with them easily. In addition, it saves time. Two students in this study stated that communicating by Zoom from their homes is relaxing, and they can talk with tutors in a comfortable atmosphere. However, other two students indicated that they felt pressured by time, in that they had to finish the session within the assigned time when taking online writing lab sessions. They missed having a relaxing time flow during the face-to-face sessions. Moreover, the Wi-Fi connection is an issue for three students in online writing lab sessions.

6. Discussion

The interviews with the tutors, the staff, and the students indicate that the advantages of the online writing lab are definitely "convenience" and "flexibility," which agrees with previous studies such as that of Robertshaw (2003). The new online reservation system enables students to make an appointment and cancel it easily; in addition, the staff, the tutors, and the students all can check their writing lab session schedule online anytime and anywhere. It is easier for both the tutors and students to take part in sessions without the need to be physically present at the campus. The zoom functions, such as, "share screen" and "annotate," are appreciated by both the tutors and tutees, since it easier for them to see documents and revise them online. Then the students can save the data and work on it after the session. Other online materials are also easily adopted on the shared screen, which helps student

learning.

On the other hand, there are disadvantages to the online writing lab. The synchronous online writing lab requires that the tutors and students have sufficient mastery of new technology, as mentioned by Peachey (2017). The interviews with tutors showed that online sessions provided less opportunity for building rapport with students, which further supports this theory.

After the COVID-19 pandemic has ended, the HGUJC has to decide how to manage its Writing Lab. It can be face-to-face, online, or hybrid of both. When planning on the Writing Lab management, the benefits and issues discussed in this paper should be considered carefully. In addition, how to solve the problems of online writing lab sessions and how to improve online communication between tutors and tutees should be widely discussed among educators.

7. Limitations and further study

The implementation of an online tutorial system at the Writing Lab was performed in an urgent response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and, as such, it was neither planned with nor preceded by an analytical or comprehensive study of best practices. Small sample sizes of the student and tutor interviewees preclude any meaningful statistical analysis of the findings. Although other video conferencing systems were considered before adopting Zoom, their suitability and comparability to Zoom were not tested. Further research should address the following issues:

- Provide a larger student sample that would lend itself well to statistical analysis.
- Look for solutions that would help online system users overcome the technological barrier, especially regarding communication and interaction.
- Analytically compare face-to-face, synchronous, and

asynchronous instruction methods at the Writing Lab.

8. Conclusion

Synchronous online tutorials were organized at many writing centers before the COVID-19 pandemic, either as an alternative option to face-to-face tutorials, or as the main method of providing tutorials. The Writing Lab at HGUJC has successfully adopted such a system in response to COVID-19. It may be concluded that online writing tutorial sessions are well-suited to the needs of the college, as they were found to be easy to conduct, effective, and, above all, convenient. On the other hand, access, communication, and rapport are, unfortunately, marred by technological barriers. Overall, the online system has proven itself to be a viable alternative to the face-to-face format. As long as the above-mentioned issues are addressed and resolved, in the post-pandemic environment tutoring online may be not just a stop-gap measure, but a worthy addition to physical sessions, or even a viable replacement of physical face-to-face sessions if necessary.

Note
This paper is based on the presentation made at the first Hokkaido chapter meeting in July 2021.

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