

Beyond traditional tutoring: ASC us how online writing tutoring enhances student engagement and success

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Background

The University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) is a relatively new (1990), small university. In the fall of 2014 there were 3,544 students enrolled in UNBC courses (K. Benham, personal communication, February 25, 2015). UNBC has a northern and regional mandate with its main campus located in Prince George, B.C. and regional campuses serving northwestern, northeastern, and south central B.C. In 2015, UNBC placed second in *Maclean's* university rankings of primarily undergraduate Canadian universities (Maclean's, 2015, p. 94).

UNBC's Academic Success Centre (ASC) offers a variety of tutoring services, peer-led learning programs, workshops, and resources. Writing tutoring options include appointments, drop-in, Skype, and asynchronous online writing tutoring through AskOnline. Local, regional, and distance students benefit from the ASC's tutoring. Regional and distance students, however, must rely on technology assisted options.

Technology is changing how people learn, teach, and tutor. Those born in the "Net generation" (1981-1994) tend to gravitate toward technology-oriented options (Bennett & Bell, 2010, as cited in Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The ASC's online writing tutoring has dramatically increased in use since its inception in 2005 (Figure 1), consistent with rapid growth of online tutoring among tutoring centers (Dvorak & Roessger, 2012). In 2014, the ASC was awarded an online writing tutoring innovator award by AskOnline for "expanding the boundaries of technology through creative application of its software platform to enhance student engagement, retention, and academic success" (AskOnline, personal communication, August 2014). Online writing tutoring has become an integral facet of the ASC's student engagement strategy.

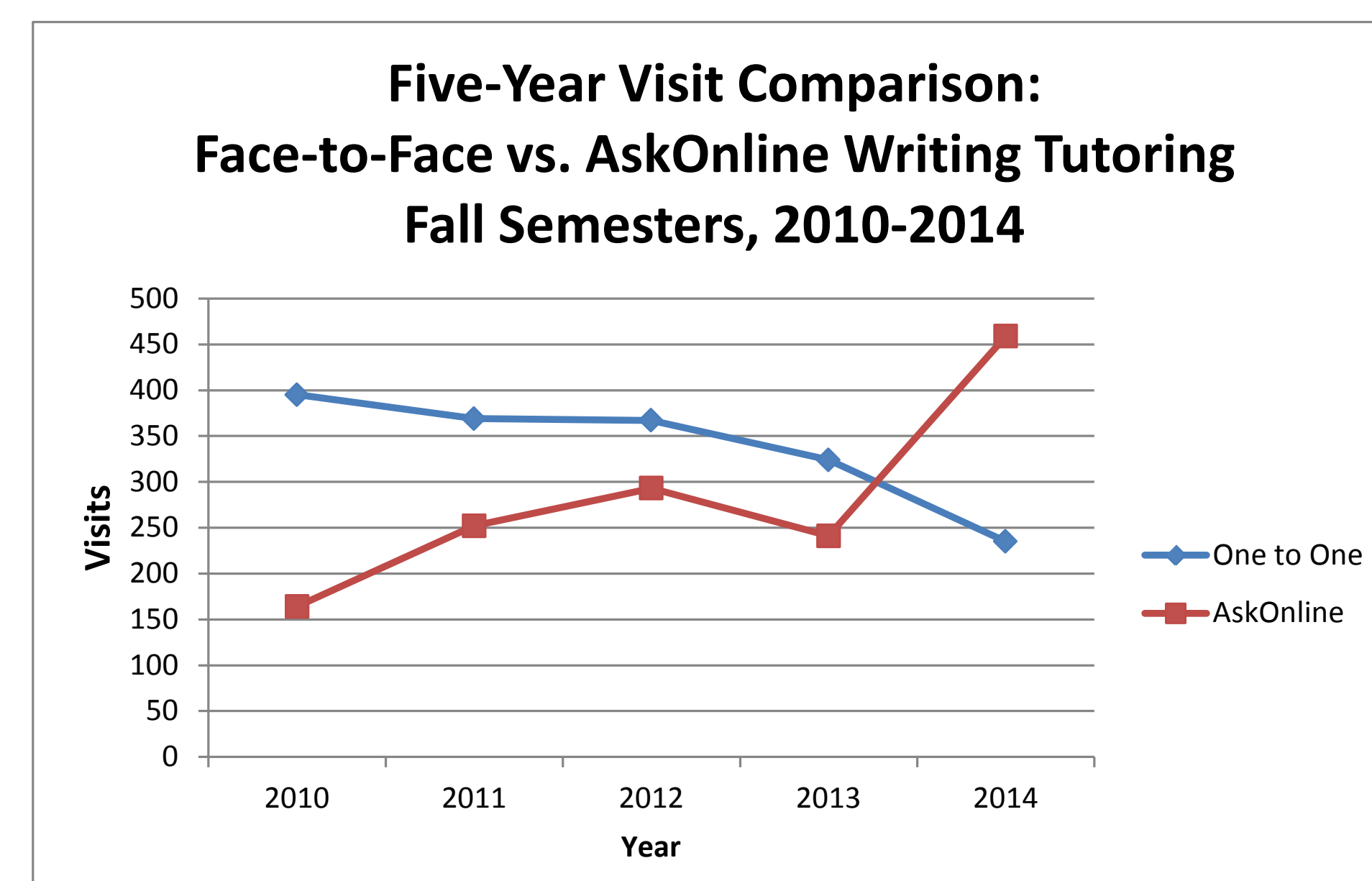


Figure 1

Online Writing Tutoring



Advantages

- Convenient — flexibility of submitting after office hours or from any location
- Removes inhibitions/anxiety for some
- "Low risk/effort" — few barriers to trying the service
- May act as a stepping stone toward getting more in-depth help
- Students can easily provide tutor evaluations at their own convenience — no pressure
- Easily embedded into a classroom curriculum
- Regional, distance, and commuter student access — no need to come to the main campus
- Tutoring supervisor has easy access to responses for monitoring and training
- Monitoring can take place without disrupting a session
- Increased control over consistency
- Tutors can work without pressure or distraction
- Tutors have freedom to look up rules or ask their supervisor questions about complex or problematic papers
- More complex submissions can be allotted more time if necessary

Disadvantages

- No personal contact — impacts social aspects and has implications for clarity
- Cannot ask questions directly as they arise
- Technology barriers for some — additional learning curve
- The purpose of the service may not be clear (not an editing service)
- Students may try to exploit the system
- Some tutors may not buy-in to online tutoring
- Easier to fall into editing
- Additional training element for the supervisor

Two Models of Online Writing Tutoring:

AskOnline Writing Tutoring



- Easy to register and get started (no wait time)
- No software requirements (browser based)
- Customized platform
- Available 24/7, 365 days a year
- Reliable (few outages)
- Strong reporting tools that are customizable
- Staffing is at the discretion of the supervisor and can be adjusted for demand
- Ticket pool allows tutors to select or be assigned papers according to their strengths
- No no-shows!
- Tutors can view the history of students' submissions
- Accessible to all students in any class

- Some parts are not customizable
- Cost (USD)

Collaborative Online Writing Tutoring



- Shared cost (CDN)
- Pool of expertise
- No software requirements (browser based)

- Only market to select classes/students
- Must contribute a minimum amount of tutor staffing to the pool
- Certain limitations may be imposed (e.g. max 30 minutes per paper)
- Standard reports (no customization)
- Reduced control over response time
- Reduced control over monitoring and consistency
- No personalization
- Loss of campus connection
- Less control over playing to tutor expertise/topic choice
- Relies on external funding (WriteAway, 2012)

Marketing: Online Writing Tutoring

Challenges:

- Non-centralized location of the ASC
- Reaching regional and distance students
- Students oversaturated with information, especially during orientation

Strategies:

- Posters
- Bookmarks
- In-class presentations
- Embedded tutoring (instructor offers bonus marks for utilizing the service)
- Word of mouth
- General ASC marketing (e.g. printed materials, orientation sessions, website, give-aways)
- Targeted marketing to regional students
- Faculty connections

Student Testimonials: Online Writing Tutoring

Since I started using this service, I've seen an increase in my marks in regards to papers substantially. I really appreciate the help!! You guys are amazing.

--J.S., April 13, 2015

Thank you so much for all your help and comments!

--K.D., Dec. 8, 2014

Thank you for the quick response! I appreciate the helpful feedback, I'll be sure to fix the slangs and repetitive use of words. Thank you for your time!

--B.V., April 10, 2015

Wow! Thank-you for your help! Your reply was super fast too! Very much appreciated.

--K.T., Sept. 25, 2014

Thank you. I really appreciate your feedback and the handouts. They were very useful.

--E.H., March 28, 2015

Thank you sooooo much!

--S.S., March 26, 2015

Thank you so much. I appreciate the feedback a ton!

--J.S., March 30, 2015

References

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