



Statement on corporate, automated, online tutoring tools

Approved by CWCA/ACCR Board of Directors: December, 2022.

Preamble

In recent years, members of the Canadian Writing Centres Association / Association canadienne des centres de rédaction (CWCA/ACCR) have noted an increase in the activity of producers of corporate, automated, online tutoring tools (CAOTTs) attempting to position themselves within higher education institutions in Canada. Many of these companies articulate such outcomes as improved writing skills, student retention, and student experience. The CWCA/ACCR shares and supports these goals, but we find that they can be far better achieved by institutional writing and learning centres within their local contexts.

Position of CWCA/ACCR

It is the position of the CWCA/ACCR that attempts to replace local, human writing tutoring and support with CAOTTs is a fundamental error. Further, any use of these tools as a supplement to writing services should be considered only with the support of and in consultation with writing centre professionals within the institution, informed by the literature of writing centre studies.

It is the position of the CWCA/ACCR that CAOTTs are not helpful or useful as a replacement for institution-based writing tutoring or instruction, whether online or in-person. CAOTTs are, in fact, a detriment to effective academic support for students, faculty, and their institutions, and CWCA/ACCR sees the use of CAOTTs as a form of social injustice.

Technological innovation

Writing centres have been at the forefront of the development and use of technology in higher education, beginning with computer-aided instruction (CAI) in the 1960s. The first dedicated CAI in a writing centre was at Michigan Technological University in 1977 (Palmquist, 2003, p. 396). Since then, writing centres have evolved to employ various technologies through the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (See, for example, Burns, 1980; Coogan, 1995; Inman & Sewell, 2000; Wargo, 2018), including the [Purdue Online Writing Lab](#), created by [Dr. Muriel Harris](#), godmother of writing centres in North America, and David Taylor in 1994 (*OWL Fact Sheet*, 2022). The COVID pandemic accelerated and expanded the use of technology in writing centres since 2020 (See, for example, *Canadian writing centres respond...*, 2020;

One year on..., 2021; *Two years on...*, 2022; Rempel, & Friesen, 2022; Wisniewski et al., 2020). Writing centres embrace and use technologies for supporting student writing when they add value to the experience for students, enrich learning, and do not pose a risk to students' privacy or rights. Some CAOTTs may have limited usefulness for students when integrated into students' writing processes within or alongside writing centres (Zhang et al., 2020); however, inaccuracies, algorithmic deficiencies, forms of social injustice, and other concerns, as discussed below, lead us to urge caution in their use.

Best practices

The following are best practices of the CWCA/ACCR---and of the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA)---from the literature on writing centres praxis and administration that are foundational to successful writing support. These foundational aspects of writing centres cannot be guaranteed when using a CAOTT, aspects that can only be carried out by local writing centres within institutions.

- Tutors and instructors who work within writing centres should specifically reflect the demographic, ethnic, linguistic, and disciplinary diversity of the student population within that institution (CWCA/ACCR, 2021; IWCA, 2007, 2015).
- Peer tutors should be selected to work in a writing centre based on performance in courses that require writing and should be endorsed by instructors (IWCA, 2007, 2015).
- Tutors and instructors should receive appropriate, comprehensive, ongoing training via methods suitable to local context (CWCA/ACCR, 2021; IWCA, 2007, 2015).
- Tutors and instructors should be evaluated by administrators of their institution and should receive feedback about the effectiveness of their work (IWCA, 2007, 2015).
- Tutors and instructors should be encouraged to participate in professional development activities, including publication opportunities and participating in local, regional, national, and international conferences (CWCA/ACCR, 2021).
- The writing centre should participate in academic and/or administrative program review processes within its own institution (CWCA/ACCR, 2021; IWCA, 2007, 2015).
- Institutions and writing centres also have a duty and a responsibility to be accessible to all students (CWCA/ACCR, 2021). Many CAOTTs are only available to students over the age of 18 (*Terms of use*, 2022), and many students do not have access to technology, creating social injustice based on race and economic disparity (Gonzales, Calarco, & Lynch, 2018; Vogels et al., 2020).

Sociodigital justice

A significant aspect of the injustice of CAOTTs is the use of student data by CAOTT corporations (Bell & Hotson, 2022; Hotson & Bell, 2022; Zuboff, 2015). Students often have no choice or do not know they have choice when confronted with a request by a faculty member or institution to subscribe to an online support tool (e.g., Grammarly, Studiosity, Turnitin). Tools such as Grammarly track students' internet use even when they are not completing work for their studies. The Grammarly browser plug-in "surveils and intervenes in their languaging practices across all contexts of online communication—from personal email to Facebook to comment forums—regardless of whether they're writing for the purposes of the

course or for personal or professional reasons” (Bell & Hotson, 2022). CAOTTs have the same practice: for example, the tutoring tool, Studiosity, collects students’ “year of study, date of birth, postcode, student status, entity/institution name, type of entity/institution (e.g., school, library, university), business address, details of sporting and other extracurricular commitments (if required to assist with scheduling)” (*Privacy and cookies policy*, 2022). They also reserve the right to change their user agreement at any time: “From time to time, Studiosity may vary unilaterally the terms or conditions on which it provides the Services” (*Terms of use*, 2022), without input from students, faculty, institutions, or government. These terms and activities, designed for financial gain, constitute “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff, 2015).

When using CAOTTs, student writing, ideas, and opinions---their knowledge production through their writing---is held by a corporation outside students’ or their institutions’ purview. Corporations providing vital institutional services cannot be trusted to protect student data (For example, see *CEO of exam monitoring software Proctorio apologises for posting student’s chat logs on Reddit* (Zhou, 2020)). Regarding the use and protection of students’ knowledge production, Studiosity’s user agreement, for example, is vague:

The Receiving Party [Studiosity] shall only disclose such confidential information to those of its employees, agents and subcontractors who need to know it for the purpose of discharging the obligations of the Receiving Party under the Contract, and shall ensure that such employees, agents and subcontractors comply with the obligations set out in this clause as though they were a party to the Contract.”

There is no definition of “agent” or “subcontractor,” whether these are employees of Studiosity or if they are separate corporations, entities, or individuals. While it is indicated that these agents and subcontractors adhere to Studiosity’s user agreement, who monitors these agents and subcontractors and their use of student data is not stipulated.

Governmental monitoring

Exposure of student work beyond the educational institution is especially fraught for international students in Canada whose education activities may be subject to monitoring by their home governments. (*China: Government Threats...*, 2019; *Confucius Institute U.S. Center...*, 2020). Foreign governments have an interest in the activities of students studying abroad, especially monitoring any activities in opposition to repressive and intolerant regimes (*CBC News*, 2019; Furstenberg, Prelec, & Heathershaw, 2020; Gil, 2017; Mandour, 2022; Marczak et al., 2018); Canadian institutions have a duty to protect the international students they recruit as community members, protection that CAOTTs are not mandated to provide and cannot ensure.

Student labour

Any replacement of local student labour with CAOTT labour is unacceptable to CWCA/ACCR members. Providing students with opportunities for employment is a significant aspect of Canadian writing centres within their institutions. This employment is important for students’ financial security. Also, student

tutors are provided with important learning opportunities and experience, which CWCA/ACCR views as a vital aspect of the institutional work of writing centres, as tutors' learning is connected to their local learning context and extended throughout their tenure in higher education outside the classroom (e.g., institutional experiential learning programs; opportunities for research, publication, and conference presentations, contributing to the field of writing centre studies). For some CWCA/ACCR member writing centres, student employment is a directive.

Outsourced writing centre labour may not follow federal and provincial labour codes, institution union agreements, institutional human resources policies and practices, or provide a living wage (*Living Wage*, 2022).

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