Random Memories of the Wired Writing Center
The Modes-to-Nodes Problem

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INTRODUCTION: THE WAY IT USED TO BE

WITH THE RAPIDLY INCREASING APPLICATION OF EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGIES in many aspects of college curricula, this seasoned writing center director, with more than sixteen years in the front lines of one-to-one instruction, can only blush when remembering the heated, serious, debates over whether to buy a new 512k computer (even with dual disk drives and the latest version of MS-DOS) over staying the course with a CPM-run Kaypro metal box. It only seems a few years ago. He remembers quite clearly, too, as if it were only yesterday, the debates over Wordstar versus Leading Edge Writer, WordPerfect over Word, Mac versus DOS, Windows versus Mac, and now Netscape versus Explorer. Sure, our technology has increased in its touted capabilities, its availability, and its cost—but have we in the writing center world improved on our basic mission of helping various writers increasing their writing abilities. Frankly, the jury is still out on this question!

In the most recent history of technological application to education, writing centers acted as the proving grounds for such application in the teaching of writing for two important, yet practical, reasons. First, writing center directors generally kept current on technological innovation in their field. They read the main pedagogic journals and, more than others perhaps, read the ancillary journals related to educational technology to see how others were using this technology to improve education in their respective fields. Hence, when a particular technological innovation came to the fore, the use of the personal computer to teach writing for example, writing center directors were usually already more aware of what had been tried and what were the possibilities for future growth, than, say, their colleagues in more traditional literary fields. Second, writing centers themselves were generally small spaces requiring relatively little economic investment in order to ensure effective pedagogy. Therefore, when a department or division got a request for a increased technology in the writing center, it was usually a small, yet manageable request; the writing center never asked for a great deal of equipment for its actual space—a few computers and a printer were a much less expensive experiment than a request for

an entire computer lab, and so such writing center requests were generally agreed to by higher administrators eager to show they could make "cutting edge" decisions.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

However, now, we have moved a great deal further along the learning curve than deciding whether to purchase a few Macintosh computers for the corner of the writing center in the basement of the English department building. One very important advancement is simply that writing centers now have a much wider audience on campuses, and the former "insular-ness" we felt as minions of the English department has now been replaced by a much more centralized motif at the center of university's missions to improve undergraduate education, writing across the curriculum, and to show accountability.

Writing centers have outgrown their armor: protection previously used to do battle with English departments as to their worth. They have already shown they are vitally needed within English departments, but much more importantly, writing centers have already proved their worth and necessity to upper administrators across campus. Therefore, today more and more writing centers are in fact university centers for learning assistance, not remedial labs for freshman composition programs. One result of this increased importance across campus is that writing center staff have assumed more decision-making responsibilities in terms of the application of a cohesive plan for educational technology across campus. In conclusion, the days of this staff worrying about the three computers in the basement writing center are now being supplanted by this same writing center staff now being asked to make sure that writing centers (satellite centers across campus), electronic writing classrooms, word processing labs, and faculty desktop computers, are not only compatible, but compatibly used.

While perhaps not yet the case at every college/university writing center to date, these changes are occurring at a remarkable pace. More and more writing center directors and staff are now expected to add computer expertise to their bag of tricks. The image of writing center as calm, safe, place for students to escape the rigors of a complex academic environment to explore rhetorical/grammatical/stylistic options in their writing is rapidly changing. Of course, the central mission of the writing center remains the same: tutor writers to write better. However, the writing center itself is now seen as a major player in the university-wide effort to improve writing skills, and, as university administrators are wont to do, they feel that technology thrown at the problem will resolve the problem, and that technology thrown to faculty had better be used on students. Therefore, more and more writing centers are being placed in the limelight— administrators are giving us computers without us even asking for them, and in return they want to see these computers in use. This expectation of increased use of technological applications can lead to two very different scenarios.

SCENARIO ONE: *THE WRITING CENTER AS TECHNOLOGICAL CENTER*

The Writing Center, located in the University Union, physically opens its doors at 8:00 a.m. each day. However, of course, since the computer network never shuts down, the writing center has never really shut down either, and the first job the director has is to download all the questions from the online writing center database that students posed to it after closing time at 8:00 p.m. the night before. Whole papers, paragraphs, and more simple questions have been e-mailed to the virtual tutor—and most of these need answers within twenty-four hours! The staff begin to enter the center and log-on the network, check e-mail, and answer some of these overnight queries the director has forwarded to their individual e-mail mailboxes. On the agenda this morning before 9:00 a.m. (when students physically can enter the center) are two classroom visits across campus—tutors have been asked to talk to history and biology classes about conducting research on the internet, a professor of sociology wants to discuss improving students' writing in an online discussion group she has set up for her sophomore class, and an English professor needs to put together a homepage for her graduate Shakespeare course.

From 9:00 a.m. to noon, a steady stream of students enter the Center, are assigned computers, and tutoring proceeds at a hectic pace. At noon, all computers are off-limits for ten minutes until a virus-scan and clean is conducted. At 1:00 p.m. the director must present a workshop for new faculty on network privileges, WWW page construction, the writing center's role in assignments, and scheduling a writing tutor's visit to a class. Faculty from across campus arrive at the center at 2:00 p.m. to explore compressed video as a possible method of one-to-one conferencing, and two tutors demonstrate this tool from opposite ends of campus. At 3:00 p.m. another virus-scan and clean and by 3:30 p.m. the network software tells the director that every terminal on her network is in use; ninety percent of users using word processing software, composing software, or approved pedagogical homepages, the other ten percent of users are opening email and surfing (and are asked to give up their terminals for those students waiting for tutoring). From 4:00 p.m. to close at 8:00 p.m., the number of undergraduate tutoring sessions diminishes, while graduate student visits increase—a small-group writing assignment for a graduate physical education course requires four networked computers and a tutor's terminal be assigned, and another business writing seminar for the community has been scheduled for the small computer seminar room located next to the writing center. Here, the director will demonstrate a new integrated office software package, as well as discuss memo etiquette on the net. At 8:00 p.m. the Writing Center closes, the online writing center comes online, and tutors finish logging tutoring sessions on their laptops to be downloaded to the central record keeping files on the network. The director checks her email, the network, looks around the writing center, and leaves for the night.

OR

SCENARIO TWO: *THE WRITING CENTER AS TECHNOLOGICAL DISASTER AREA*

The Writing Center, located in the bottom floor of the English Building opens at 8:00 a.m.. The director enters to find that the network mysteriously shut down last night at 9:00 p.m. When the network shut down, since all are interconnected, all electronic writing classrooms in the English department are now inoperable, as are the computer-activated answering machines on secretarial, faculty, and staff desks. A quick call to the computer center arranges a 10:30 a.m. (at the earliest) visit from an overworked, edgy, technician. Tutors wander in (late) and English faculty rush in to see what they should do in class if the computers don't work (the director of writing does not come in till around 11)! At 9:00 a.m. tutoring sessions are slow—students can't print until the network is up again, and so really have nothing to bring to the session. By 10:45 a.m., the network is up and running again, faculty and tutors are getting e-mail again, and classes are running smoothly once more. At 11:45 a.m., the network crashes, sending three papers into the ether somewhere, producing groans and not a few tears, and more faculty winging it in the electronic classrooms.

The director fires up four laptops for tutoring sessions, but they don't have the latest software versions and too many students' files are incompatible. By 1:00 p.m., the "old" grammar hotline rings—students want to use this medium instead of the on-line writing center since they have received no replies to their questions posed last night. This quickly become unwieldy. By 2:00 p.m., the network is up and running again, although none of the satellite centers have computer access yet—a problem since the writing center in the college of business is supposedly presenting a tutoring workshop in ten minutes.

At 3:00 p.m., a virus is reported on all computers in two electronic labs and the writing center computers—a virus the scan failed to detect, and all students who used these computers must be contacted to tell them not to use any other computers, but instead to return to the center to be de-bugged. By 5:00 p.m., three other labs across campus are infected by students who did not get the message in time. The computer center director calls; she is not happy with us!

Director closes the center at 5:15 p.m. in disgust.

THE REALITY OF "IMPROVED" TECHNOLOGY

As the co-author of a successful 1.7 million dollar Title III federal grant for implementing technological innovations as a means of improving writing skills among developmental students, let me assure you that both scenarios can and will become reality very quickly without some very careful advance planning. Adding lots of new technology into a writing center because someone gives you the money to do so is without a doubt the biggest mistake a writing center director can make!

First, let me clarify this statement by noting that here I am not talking about adding less than a dozen computers into the writing center. The addition of this

number of computers into a writing center is not considered very technologically advanced by the Ed. Tech. gurus—in technological terms this writing center is simply catching up with the mainstream—and this is an important misreading of our mission in the writing center world. What the introduction of technological innovation into the writing center environment generally refers to is network-able terminals linked to a central computer, with access to other electronic writing classrooms, compressed video, email, internet connections, perhaps even an online writing center, and current, supported, hardware and software.

The key problem with this move, from modes to nodes if you will, is that it is not writing center driven. Instead, educational technologists and higher ranking administrators are making too many of the decisions in the implementation of new and improved technology in the writing center. If writing center personnel are not included in these important planning discussions to implement more technology into their environment, and their comments and evaluations are given no more than simple lip-service, then, if you will pardon the war-metaphor, those outside the trenches will be making the decisions as to what types of weapons the troops really need to win the war. Hence, the key problem with a technologically-advanced writing center that has been planned by the generals instead of those on the ground is that often it ceases to be a writing center, and, instead turns into a glorified computer lab.

We in the writing center world have worked diligently to explain to our colleagues what it is we do and what it is we do not do in the writing center. We offer students an audience to bounce their writing ideas off, we tutor students in the areas they have problems in, and we do not evaluate their work in the same way in which an instructor evaluates their writing. We are different. We are not a classroom, we are not teachers, we are not red-pen wielding enemies. We are stand-alone professionals in our academic endeavor; a status we have worked very hard to attain. We are the good guys in a system full of bad guys for first time college students. However, when technology begins to be institutionalized throughout the university, and it arrives in the writing center, then the writing center and the perception of the writing center changes very quickly.

When writing centers take on too many computers, they become computer labs. If the primary role of the tutors changes from tutoring to assuring that computers are working and that students can use this technology, are they really writing tutors anymore? The answer is, of course, no! They have become computer technicians, and soon faculty and students alike will expect them to act primarily in this capacity.

Also, the writing center director can soon change roles under this new system. If the writing center changes into a glorified computer lab, then the former writing center director stands a good chance of now being seen as the current director of electronic writing classroom. What this means in terms of day-to-day duties might be quite a drastic change for this key professional. Instead of working on

improving writing across the department or university, this person may instead end up ensuring that computers are running, faculty are trained on these computers, and that software is up to date. Who is going to prepare this director for this change in roles? Who is going to mentor this director in making these technological decisions? Who is going to help insure that this director remains current?

Finally, the space the writing center itself once located is in danger of changing also. Administrators hate to see computers sitting unused and a writing center with computers not in use in many deans' eyes is a classroom not in use! The idea of a room with thirty computers not being used as a classroom is very hard to overcome for many administrators. Indeed, for many students who have to line up for an available computer in a lab, the idea of passing a writing center full of computers that they cannot use unless they are being tutored is also a bitter pill to swallow. Writing centers can disappear almost overnight.

In addition, a closer examination of the development of online writing centers is important here. While, of course, an innovative and important method of reaching non-traditional and commuting students, many of these OWLs have already grown into, or have the potential to become, something completely different. While a closer examination of these on-line centers is already covered in this collection, it is important to realize the passive nature of these web creations. In many cases, it is as if writing center directors have simply digitized their old grammar handouts to be placed on the web. Now, we in the writing center world already know that a handout on fragments is not very useful unless there is a tutor there to judge the tutee's reaction to it, and so a digitized handout, even with its very own URL address, suffers the same fate.

We must not forget that the very selling point that made writing centers so vital in the past, our human touch, might be what is lost here with an over-reliance on technological application.

THE COMPROMISE SOLUTION

However, moderate increases in technological advances and their implementation into our curricula are not going away, and it is unreasonable for writing center directors opposed to these increases to expect any such decrease. As writing teachers we have prospered with the advent of computers. More students are attracted to writing because of computers than in spite of them. We know writing is more fun on a computer, we know writing, or at least rewriting, is easier on a computer, and we know our students appreciate the ease of the spell checker and thesaurus. In addition, we also know that our students love surfing the net; we have many students who would never think of opening a book for enjoyment, but think nothing of spending two-three hours a night reading a wide variety of homepages.

Simply stated, for writing centers to survive, grow, and prosper in the next wave of technological advances, we must reinvent ourselves. However, in this process of re-invention, we must not allow ourselves to be redefined by someone else, we must not allow our important pedagogical task to be subsumed by technological

babysitting roles, and we must not allow technology to supplant students as our primary responsibility.

RE-INVENTING THE WRITING CENTER FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In an effort to reinvent the writing center, we must look at how we became so successful in the first place. We were successful against many odds because we offered a service that people needed—we put a human face on a complex skills, we offered a helping hand when others refused to reach out, and we offered a relaxed atmosphere to those who needed reassurance that they could indeed learn to write well.

Despite all the technological advances mentioned in this chapter, students still need human interaction to help them write more effectively. Computers, hardware and software, T1 cable, interactive video conferencing, homepages, online writing centers, modems, networks, and the like, all offer technological ease of processing and producing text. Only a human voice, a reader, and, in the context of a tutoring session, a face across the table can give contextual feedback to the writer in real-time—when it is most important. An email message can provide a certain degree of encouragement; a smiling tutor simply provides more!

We must regain the leadership role we once had in the evaluation of educational technology. We must be seen on campus as leaders in his area and not followers. As leaders, we can help appropriately integrate technology into both classroom and writing center, without making either area totally dependent on this technology. As writing specialists, we must recognize the importance much of this new technology has brought to our students' views on writing. Surely, we can all agree that if it were not for email, many of our students would not be writing outside their academic requirements; we cannot say that these same students were busy writing letters to each other and to friends all over the world in the pre-email days. So this technology has more students writing more often and we should be happy about this.

In terms of the writing center itself, yes, we should give our students opportunity to compose on computers, to interact with other writers about their writing on computers, either through networks, chat-rooms, or email, and yes, we should understand how to teach/tutor using these various technological innovations. But, we should also not lose sight of the fact that we need to get students off the machines also to talk about ways to improve their writing. We need to do what we do best, tutor writing face to face. We need to make sure that our writing centers do not close down or turn into computer labs. Instead we must re-advertise within these computer labs that we are available to help writers improve even more. Students understand that computers are not the panacea for their writing problems; they are enjoying writing on computers more than when they wrote with pens, but they also know that a tutor will help them improve even more.

CONCLUSION: JUMPING OFF THE VIRTUAL FENCE

In reviewing this essay, it becomes clear that there are both advantages and disadvantages to a more fully "wired" writing center. However, this debate needs

closure and fence-sitting eventually leads to splinters in not so comfortable places. Yes, technological applications are going to improve the services writing centers can offer, but only if we do not allow technology to assume the primary responsibility for the transmission of the knowledge we have to share. We must use technology more effectively to retain our human side, our naturalness, and our ability to gauge human perception of information. To this end then, our goals as writing center personnel for the forthcoming century should be as follows:

1. to understand technological innovations and the potential applications to the tutoring environment;
2. to promote the writing center as the human-side to writing improvement;
3. to continue offering increased writing tutorial services across campus;
4. to conduct more research into how various technological innovations can improve writing skills;
5. to serve as a consultative group before other wide-ranging technological applications are implemented by administrators and others unaware of the pedagogical impact of such decisions

Writing centers can and must work hand-in-hand with those who design and promote education technology. We must not however, allow technology to drive pedagogy. As such then, writing centers should remain open, friendly, non-classroom-like environments, with great tutors and limited but readily available access to needed writing technology; they should serve primarily as a valued, individualized, pedagogical resource, and only secondarily as a possible additional technological resource center.

We need our web pages, our online writing centers, our writing assistance software packages, our networked computers, and our ever-increasing hardware innovations. However, we need students to be attracted to us as people who can help them through a one-to-one arrangement, over a cup of coffee, with a paper (or a part of a paper) in an environment that screams "time out!" We need to keep selling ourselves as the "Time Out" space—time out from teachers, computers, spell checkers, grades, online questions, and the pressures inherent in writing in this technological age. We need instead to be what we have always been, the "Play Ball" space—the place for people to take risks, discuss options, read to each other, and work like writers around a table. Once we get the students into the writing center to talk about their writing, to really discuss their writing with a real person, then we can return them to the technological utopia someone else has created for them. In the long run, my bet is there will still be a place for us in (and in spite of) all this technological innovation. Frankly, my sneaking conviction is that as technology continues to change the face of writing instruction and writing centers in general, more and more students will welcome the opportunity to talk with a caring tutor at some point in their writing process.