Have You Visited Your Online Writing Center Today?
Learning, Writing, and Teaching Online at a Community College

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Although the physical writing center at Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) has allowed us to reach many students and instructors, we still believe that a writing center is a "place without walls"; it is an idea; it is a place for discussion, for seeking, for sharing, and should not depend on particular physical locations. We like the idea of being "wall-less" because it posits that what we do in a writing center represents a better way to write, and should occur anywhere writing occurs. To fulfill this notion, we established the writing center at several physical locations throughout our multicampus community college with the idea that it could be a resource for both students and faculty. Nonetheless, we were concerned that the program was not reaching its largest possible audience. To reach students and faculty more effectively, we introduced the SLCC Online Writing Center.

The motives for broadening our outreach were based on several key assumptions about community college faculty and students. Both groups lead complex lives that preclude them from full participation in a writing center. Many students, for example, hold down a full-time job, or multiple low-paying part-time jobs[1]; attempt to take a full load of classes; often have parental obligations; and have to commute to work, day care, and (since many community colleges like SLCC do not have student housing) to school (Vaughan 1995, 18). Simultaneously, they struggle to make economic, personal, and academic ends meet[2]. George Vaughan from the Academy for Community College Leadership and Advancement, Innovation, and Modeling (ACCLAIM) describes the typical community college student as a "citizen-as-student" who ". . . is concerned with paying taxes, working full time, supporting a family, paying a mortgage, and with other responsibilities associated with the everyday role of a full-time citizen" (17). Vaughan differentiates the community college student from the traditional four-year college "student-as-citizen" who is "customarily perceived as being in a holding pattern, waiting until graduation to assume the rights and responsibilities that accompany full citizenship" (17). Unlike

so-called traditional students (right out of high school with few obligations), we believed that on- and off-campus pressures make it difficult for community college students to take advantage of services like peer-response tutoring.

Community college instructors have similarly unsettled lives. Of the roughly 190,000 part-time community college instructors in the United States (Vaughan 19), most teach only one course per quarter (Vaughan 21; Spear, Seymour, and McGrath 1990, 23), yet lead, as Eugene Arden writes, "hectic lives, on killer schedules. Many . . . hold a full-time job elsewhere or . . . [manage] a household, in addition to moonlighting as adjuncts" (1995, A44). Nevertheless, George Vaughan shows that a substantial group of "dependent" part-time instructors "may teach at more than one community college during the same term, [and] depend upon the community college for much of their income, their professional contacts and, to a degree, their social life" (21). Even if the instructor attains full-time status, she often teaches five three-credit-hour courses per term (Vaughan 21), works on committees, oversees programs, and coordinates part-time faculty (Palmer 1992, 6062). Likewise, faculty often strive to keep current with their field, yet have little time to share their ideas, fears, or course goals with fellow instructors (Spear, Seymour, and McGrath 23-26; Palmer 1992, 62).

Still, when contemplating the difficulties students and faculty face, we saw that a community college provides exceptional benefits to both groups. For example, due to smaller class sizes and the higher number of instructors with several years of teaching experience, students can have a focussed and personalized educational experience that may not be available at other institutions. Likewise, because of economic constraints or previous performance in schooling, many students would not even have the chance at higher education without the community college(El-Khawas and Carter 1988, 20 and 22; Medsker 1960, 4). Furthermore, because of community colleges, it seems, many students change their view of their role in the community. Rather than seeing themselves as "remedial," many students grow to see themselves as critically astute citizens in a community of learners. Our experience has shown us, however, that students received fewer benefits from their college experience without the opportunity to make contact with instructors and fellow students.

Instructors benefit through having greater exposure to teaching first and second year students than is available at large research universities where scholarship is usually required, and graduate students teach most first and second semester composition courses. Because of their exposure to teaching, community college instructors can develop an experienced insight into first and second year composition that cannot be achieved through outside research alone (Palmer 1990, 33). Collaboration with colleagues enhances the instructor's insight. As with students, we know that if instructors do not have the opportunity to collaborate, their academic development will suffer.

Indeed, besides the hectic nature of their lives, community college faculty and students have few opportunities to share their experience and knowledge with

colleagues either on or off campus. Furthermore, outside the writing center and the classroom, chances are rare for community college students and faculty to collaborate in *nontutorial*, *nonteacherly* setting with readers who are their *respondents* rather than their *instructors.*

The assumptions about the benefits community college faculty and students receive and problems they face lead us to the notion that a writing center could be the place to enhance community college educational opportunities. The community college mission privileges the notion that education should be available to those who seek it, and upholds the belief that learning derives from a collaborative, community effort.

The positive effects of collaborative education shaped our model writing center; yet, if we were not reaching a fuller audience, and if the people who were supposed to be collaborating could not share in the writing center, then would that paradigm really affect how individuals write and think about writing? To be beneficial to such an audience, a writing center must attempt to bring them together in ways that take into consideration the complexities of their lives. Our audience's constraints motivated us to figure out how we could better reach them.

A COMPUTER-BASED OUTREACH

We presumed that to reach more people, we would have to reduce the effects of time and space—the most complex aspect of their lives. In the late eighties and early nineties, SLCC instructors began to distribute information through computer networks. Initially this was only through a local area network, but, because of its universal conventions and accessibility, instructors began to use the internet. By the early nineties when we first used such technology in the writing center, teachers had been using computers for several years to connect students via email, electronic bulletin boards, or news lists. These resources were available at locations other than our writing center computer lab. Public libraries in the surrounding cities offered access to bulletin board systems like gopher, or collaborative sharing programs such as news lists. SLCC's campus labs offered those services as well as email and real-time chatting software. These electronic services, we supposed, might reduce the limitations of time and space.

Since instructors were using these resources already, we felt that using them in the writing center would bring our services to more locations and people. In these early stages we set up email tutoring, experimented with electronic bulletin boards, shared in news lists, and investigated some primitive real-time "chatting" software.

Nevertheless, during these early experimental stages few students and even fewer instructors used our resources. We conjectured that students and teachers did not know about the services available, did not know how to get to them, did not know how to use them, or, as the profile of their hectic lives suggests, did not

have time to go to campus labs or the library to get to them. After considering our audience more fully, we came to the conclusion that the greatest obstacle for our audience was the lack of home access.

Impact of the Web

The World Wide Web has been one of the most important developments on the internet, since it spurred the desire for internet connectivity in the home[3]. It provided a unifying medium for our service and the impetus to develop our resources. The web is easy to use, is graphical, presents multimedia, and supports the easy distribution and linkage of information. Likewise, the web integrates many internet resources such as email, FTP, or Telnet. Because of its appeal, easy use, and its comprehensive application of internet protocols, the web gives writing centers an excellent outreach medium.

Electrifying the SLCC Writing Center

Our first web pages, created in 1994, merely offered information about the physical writing center: how people could make an appointment and where we could be found. This simple "bulletin board" approach revealed our rather unenlightened notion that the site could only advertise our physical writing center. After understanding our audience's need to contact the writing center from off campus, we soon replaced this bulletin board approach by broadening the pages to include information that related more to writing issues than schedules and locations.

The Next Step: the Online Writing Center

Soon after we posted our first web pages, we realized that there were many possible uses of this new medium. At that point we searched the web for other writing centers. We were particularly inspired by Purdue University's Online Writing Lab (OWL), one of the first attempts to bring a writing center to the web. At the time, it presented a variety of handbook-like resources about writing, as well as links to online tutoring. Through observing other early OWLs, we soon expanded our web pages to offer comprehensive writing center resource designed for our diverse audience.

We fashioned the SLCC Online Writing Center home page (see figure 1) to be a simple-to-use writing environment (Gardner 1997, "Welcome"). All information is succinct in order to make the site easier to read. A table of contents remains constant throughout the reading of the site because of web-based HTML frames[4]. The frames split the screen into two independent pages: the table of contents, and a space for viewing selected web links. To enhance readability further, a forthcoming index of the site will allow readers to find information by subject or keyword.

When the user selects a link in the table of contents, the reading frame switches to the linked document, but the table of contents remains the same. This constancy gives readers a point of reference so that they do not easily get lost. Many novice web users find the lack of connections between sources on some web pages frustrating. They will search the web, find a link that seems cogent, go to that link,

Figure 1
SLCC Online Writing Center Home Page
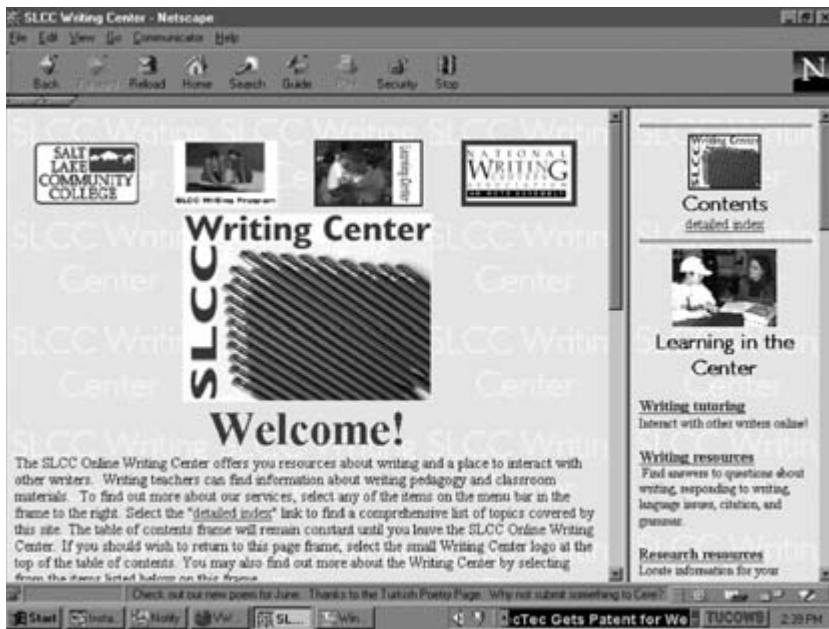
yet not know the purpose of what they are reading, or cannot go farther because of inconsistency in the web page. This experience often baffles the novice reader. Maintaining constant templates provides the reader the consistency of format they need to find their way through a site[5].

We keep the pages graphically simple to speed loading on slower internet connections and to lessen any confusion do to "graphics overload." Our images remind readers where they have been, help them track their way back, and hint at what the links associated with the graphics are. Such reminders are very important for new internet users, who lack experience using web browsers. Graphics also help the reader to identify sections of the online writing center without having to refer to manuals or help screens. We also want to make the SLCC Online Writing Center as human as possible; thus our graphics are mostly digitized photographs of people working in or around our physical writing center, or people in writing and learning situations (see figure 2).

The Frame is divided into three sections (two of which are visible). Note the use of icons to suggest the purpose of the sections. The icons used also serve to "humanize" the site by showing people in writing situations.

Keeping the Audience in the Center

The division of the table of contents into three major sections that represent our diverse audience enhances the readability and the relevance of the pages:

Figure 2
Detail: Table of Contents Frame
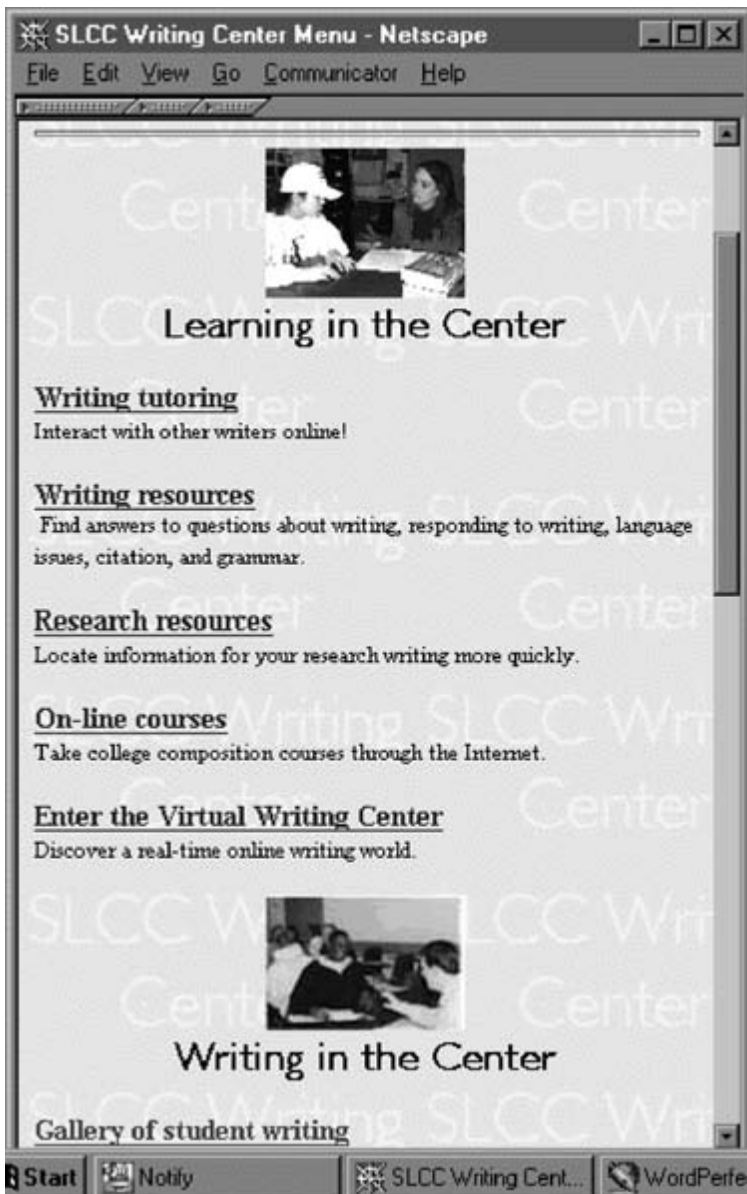
- Learning in the Center (for student writers);
- Teaching in the Center (for instructors);
- Writing in the Center (for both audiences, and others interested in writing).

Rather than segregating the readers by making one series of web pages for students and another for teachers, we mesh their endeavors by crafting one multipurpose, clearly-organized site. Unifying the site for students and faculty emphasizes that writing and learning are inseparable—that both groups engage in the activities the online writing center promotes. (See figure 3 for the architecture of the SLCC Online Writing Center. For more detailed information about the site, point your web browser to <http://www.slcc.edu/wc/index.html>.)
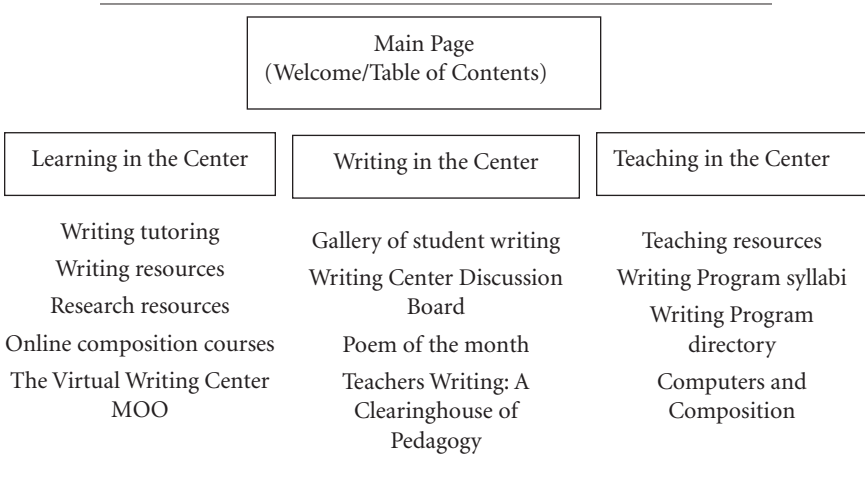
Reading the online flow chart (figure 3) from top to bottom, the reader "hits" the main page with the table of contents and can select her way through the site. The table of contents (see figures 1 and 2) remains constant throughout the navigation of the site, but disappears when the browser displays pages that the SLCC Writing Center does not maintain.

Learning in the Center. The first major subsection of the SLCC Online Writing Center, "Learning in the Center," offers student writers online tutoring, hypertext links to resources about writing and research on the internet, and specific pages and computer programs for the SLCC Writing Program and its courses. These services present a broad spectrum of ideas about writing, and offer different methods of writing response. For example, we offer links to writing and research information from a variety of other OWLs exemplifying different theoretical perspectives. Furthermore, we offer online tutoring both asynchronously through email and synchronously (in real time) through our MOO server, the Virtual Writing Center MOO (VWCMOO). We provide easy-to-understand online guides for both types of tutoring, and student writers may choose the system they feel the most comfortable with.

Writing in the Center. "Writing in the Center" is the SLCC Online Writing Center's core. It provides a place for students and faculty of a community college to share their writing with each other and the world through such resources as online student-edited community "E-zines" (see Hall 1997), or archives of instructors' writing (Gardner 1997 "Teachers Writing"). Generally, the writing represented is as diverse as the community it supports. We also offer a web "bulletin board" and real-time discussions on VWCMOO. On these systems writers share their writing, and discuss issues with others.

Teaching in the Center. The "Teaching in the Center" pages support writing instruction at Salt Lake Community College. Through resources ranging from weekly online discussions of computers and writing on VWCMOO (Gardner 1997, "MOO Discussions"), to course resources such as syllabi and curricular

Figure 3
Flow Chart

Main Page (Welcome/Table of Contents)		
Learning in the Center	**Writing in the Center**	**Teaching in the Center**
Writing tutoring	Gallery of student writing	Teaching resources
Writing resources	Writing Center Discussion Board	Writing Program syllabi
Research resources	Poem of the month	Writing Program directory
Online composition courses	Teachers Writing: A Clearinghouse of Pedagogy	Computers and Composition
The Virtual Writing Center MOO		

guidelines for writing courses, the writing center offers a place for instructors to collaborate with their colleagues at the college and from around the world.

A writing center's purpose is about writers and the complex process through which they create writing. Encouraging writers to submit their work and share in a broad discussion of writing, promotes the notion that a writing center (online or not) is a place to think about writing, to share writing, and to develop as a writer. Such a site is unique for many students and faculty at a community college since few publications are dedicated to their work and the discussion of that work. Moreover, for our audience few places exist, except the classroom or the physical writing center, that stimulate such writing and discussion. Although getting community members to submit their writing is difficult, students and faculty are beginning to submit their work as the SLCC Online Writing Center gains more attention.

As in the physical writing center, the SLCC Online Writing Center fosters a place to write and to discuss writing. Moreover, the online writing center provides different opportunities for sharing than can be found in the physical writing center. For example, because of spatial constraints and general inconvenience, collecting and sharing texts with a variety of people in the physical writing center is very difficult, whereas such an archive is readily attainable online.

CONCLUSION

Online services allow the SLCC Writing Center to reach students and faculty who might have previously felt marginalized because of their busy lives. Though the number of people currently using these resources is not overwhelming[6], use has increased as more students and faculty discover the Internet[7]. Centering the

SLCC Online Writing Center on the specific concerns of its community college audience encourages continued growth. A community college online writing center provides a place for overwhelmed students and faculty to center themselves on academic work in the midst of very complex lives.

Through developing the online writing center, we have gained an important insight: the SLCC Online Writing Center is not merely a transferal of our "real" writing center to a computer mediated setting. Online services shape how we view the physical writing center and broaden what it has to offer. In a sense, our assumptions about audience's demography have become less important. While we believe that busy students and instructors have fewer chances to use the physical writing center, an online component is becoming essential to what we do with *any* student, not just the ones who cannot come in person. Going online has given us fresh insight into the role of the writing center and what happens in a place that has fewer physical constraints to it. We built our physical writing center around the idea that a writing center is, in essence, wherever writing occurs. The SLCC Online Writing Center realizes that idea.

NOTES

1. According to U.S. Census data, nearly 51% of community college students have a full time job. The same data indicates that roughly 10% of traditional four-year college students have full-time jobs (Vaughan 1995, 18).
2. Recently, our assumptions were corroborated through a writing center survey. We found that 40% of the surveyed students who have heard of our services, but did not come in, claimed that they were "too busy" to visit the writing center (Thompson 1997) We surveyed 145 Salt Lake Community College students in composition courses English 99,101, and 102 at the beginning of Summer Quarter 1997. 114 (76.3%) of the students had heard of the writing center prior to being surveyed (Thompson 1997).
3. Like many online writing labs (OWLs) on the internet today, the SLCC Online Writing Center exits primarily in the web (Pegg 1997). Through these pages we have integrated our offerings, and they are presented seamlessly to the web user. The web pages reflect the services we wish to offer our patrons. To ensure our pages respond to our audience, we put together a faculty advisory committee that oversees the general direction of the online writing center. I am chair of that committee and am editor/implementer of the online writing center. I have regularly polled online writing center users to gain their perceptions of the readability of the site, and how it might be improved. Both response from the advisory board and information from the polls have shaped the direction that the takes.
4. An excellent site to learn advanced HTML coding is *A Beginner's Guide to HTML* by The National Center for Supercomputing Applications (1997).
5. Since some web authors are wary of using frames, other OWLs will often create a similar "menu bar" by using a common format and appearance for all of their pages.

To forgo problems for users with less powerful systems that cannot support frames, we have created a "no frames" version of the SLCC Online Writing Center which contains the same information as the frames version (Gardner 1997 "No Frames"). A fine example of a repeating format is at the University of Michigan's *Online Writing & Learning* (1997). This page presents a common interface throughout its various pages.

6.   Although it is difficult to account for usage of the resources, we do collect several statistics: the online writing center home page, for example, has approximately 800 page hits per month, but our other pages average approximately 100 hits per month. A hit is counted whenever a web browser reads the pages. Our email tutoring was about 2% of our total tutoring effort during the 1996-97 academic year. This usage seems low, but it has increased from .5% the previous year.

7.   As the previously mentioned writing center survey showed, 45.9% of the sampled students claim to have internet access at home, and 76.4% of the respondents claimed to have a computer at home (Thompson 1997). This rather surprising per-centage indicates the potential internet access of our audiences. Because the prices of appropriate computers are dropping, internet access is fairly cheap, and the gen-eral appeal of the World Wide Web, it seems likely that soon most of the students with computers at home will also have access to the internet.