CHAPTER 20. LLMS GENERATE ANSWERS, WRITING TUTORS ASK QUESTIONS: GenAI AS SITES OF TRANSFER FOR WRITING CENTER PRACTICE

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On its face, the difference between the text a large language model (LLM)—or generative AI (GenAI) more broadly—generates and the critical thinking writing centers can facilitate presents a major mismatch in approaches to writing. Based on conversation (Bruffee), a writing center session's effectiveness rests in the social nature of the operation, allowing a writer to get off the screen and discuss their text with another writer. The heart of a writing center session is this conversation, a back-and-forth questioning between tutor and writer. A good session depends on the ability of a tutor to ask the right questions. In writing centers and programs, ours included, we train students to write for critical inquiry and, as Annette Vee writes in *Composition Studies*, for "productive uncertainty" (177). This approach is

> based on the idea that students can thrive wrestling with difficult texts, that they can come up with new and important questions about their worlds and their own words. The point isn't what kind of writing students produce, exactly, although writing is the medium students use to pursue their inquiry. The point is the process they went through to get there. The point is the challenge: the pleasurable difficulty of writing and reading. (177)

The ability to question and deeply engage in meaning-making through uncertainty is not something AI can replicate. And even if it could, this replicability would never diminish the value of critical inquiry for people who aim to learn and write. As it stands now, GenAI is a skilled answerer—not questioner, as Vee asserts. GenAI provides a statistically normative response to a user's input as quickly and accurately as possible, though accuracy is not a given. "It responds

with confidence if it's right and even if it's obviously, tragically wrong," Vee writes. "More importantly, it has no relationship to what it means to be uncertain, to inquire, to examine its own experiences. It has no stakes in what it writes" (177). We see here the two fundamentally different aims of GenAI and writing centers: generating answers is the current purview of GenAI; encouraging a student's learning and development of critical inquiry through writing is the more expansive and human purview of writing centers.

However, might we look at what GenAI *can* do and find aspects of the writing center conversation that could be extended by writers using GenAI, or as Chloe Crull and Nicholas Stillman write in this collection "How can writing with AI be used to *enhance* discussion and reflection in the writing center, rather than *replace* it" (298)? While GenAI can never hope to replace the socially grounded nature of a writing center session or the role writing can have in a learner's growth and development, aspects of the session can be supported by AI for the writer outside of a session. As a director of the writing center trying to figure out how to introduce GenAI into her work (Vinyard) and a writing program faculty member whose research focuses in part on GenAI in student writing (Schnitzler), we decided to combine our expertise to explore this idea at our institution, a private Research 1 (R1) university serving 5,600 undergraduates and 13,000 graduate students. We noticed a common feature of both GenAI and tutoring—questioning. What follows is an analysis of the ways that questioning works in writing center sessions paired with a description of how writers might use questioning skills with GenAI, revealing a potential role for GenAI in writing center work. Prompting tutors and writers to consciously consider the role of questioning in sessions can create conditions for writers to transfer questioning skills to work with GenAI beyond the writing center. In a sense, writers can use GenAI to recreate certain aspects of a writing center session, challenging writers to serve as their own tutors after their sessions are over and the centers are closed. As the writing center is a key place for transfer in writing, implementing this approach can be naturally woven into our work.

WRITING CENTER AS SITE OF TRANSFER

Rebecca Nowacek defines the study of transfer as "how (and why and when) students connect learning from one domain with learning in another domain" (3). As Bonnie Devet states, transfer "may be one of the most important subjects composition studies has explored since process itself" (120), as all of our work as writing teachers and tutors is geared to helping students take what they learn about writing in one context and apply it to another. Nowacek notes that an interest in studying transfer can be seen as far back as Aristotle's *Rhetoric* in the

4th century B.C.E. (13), with an uptick in studies published in the last 20 years (Nowacek et al., *Writing Knowledge Transfer* 3). As a field, we are keenly attuned to identifying ways that we can help developing writers integrate writing principles learned in one context to another.

Transfer is a primary goal in the work of writing centers. While writers may see a session as a place to polish a final draft, tutors focus sessions on helping writers develop their skills (North 438), and thus view writing centers as places where we "teach" transferable principles about writing (Driscoll and Harcourt 2). The goal of writing center work is to facilitate the transfer of writing knowledge from a writing center session to a writer's practice. Much of transfer research in the writing center focuses on how tutors transfer knowledge from training or other writing experiences into their sessions (Nowacek et al., *Writing Knowledge Transfer* 243); however, our interest lies in what writers can transfer from a session to their independent work.

In their study of the transfer in a first-year writing curriculum Kathleen Blake Yancey, Matthew Davis, Liane Roberston, Kara Taczak, and Erin Workman identify three conditions for transfer to occur: (1) students should understand that transfer is a reachable goal of their learning experiences, (2) students must learn and reflect on foundational concepts and how they operate across writing situations, (3) and students must reflect on the ways their own writing process varies across writing tasks ("The Teaching for Transfer Curriculum" 291). All three conditions are key elements of successful tutoring sessions; tutors help writers reflect on the strategies used in sessions so that they can replicate these approaches outside of the center. Writing center sessions are ideal places to emphasize concepts such as audience and purpose, as well as process strategies, and reflection on writing is central to writing center work. In addition to specific concepts that writers may transfer from a writing center session, Yancey et al. also point to the importance of a "writing transfer-mindset" ("Writing Across College" 42), which they define as an openness to applying writing knowledge across assignments, courses, and disciplines. Students with a transfer mindset repurpose strategies developed in a class (or a writing center session) in new contexts. The implication for writing centers then is that tutors must stress the ways that rhetorical and process strategies discussed in a session must be reflected upon and then taken up in future writing situations.

THE ROLE OF QUESTIONING

Reflection plays a key role in transferring work from the center to the solo writing context, and this process of reflection is sparked by the practice of questioning. Ben Rafoth writes that "conversation is the key idea behind writing

centers" (146), and conversation in sessions is replete with questions initiated by both tutors and writers. Understanding how questions operate in tutorials informs how we might transfer this practice from a tutorial to a GenAI-assisted writing session. It is, after all, through talk that writers "make visible their prior learning (in this case, about writing) or try to access the prior learning of someone else" (Nowacek et al., "Transfer Talk"). For our purpose, this point is key as we are looking at ways that writers control the process of their growth in and beyond a session.

An overview of the research on questions in writing center conferences displays the centrality of questioning for writing development. Isabelle Thompson and Jo Mackiewicz offer a detailed taxonomy of the types of questions that frequently occur in writing center conferences in "Questioning in Writing Center Conferences." This study reports that questions in writing center sessions can address knowledge deficits, move writers and tutors toward common ground, socially coordinate between writers and tutors, serve as conversational controls, and lead and scaffold, pushing writers to answers, revision, or brainstorming (42). These multiple categories of questions illustrate the two broad areas of work in writing centers, what we're calling *informational* and *social*. Writers often ask *informational* questions—knowledge questions and structural or informational scaffolding questions (Mackiewicz and Thompson 520) on an assignment, assuming that the answers to the questions refer only to the current task. Tutors, however, seek to generalize the work of the session so that writers may use strategies learned in the session later, thus building a foundation for the transfer of writing knowledge to other writing tasks (Limberg et al. 372; Munje et al. 337). This latter type of question—the "common ground," "social coordination," and "conversation control" types of questions, from Thompson and Mackiewicz's earlier taxonomy—is *social* in nature and is where tutors forward writing information in ways that facilitate transfer and is the heart of center work (42). This is social interaction, where the speakers are engaged not just in information exchange but in a dialogic designed to "enhance student learning" (Munjee et al. 350). This is not the place for GenAI intervention, but it *is* where tutors can prime writers to engage with GenAI effectively, a crucial exercise for maintaining transfer goals. As Kirkwood Adams and Maria Baker write in this collection, transfer possibilities of GenAI use are limited when students use these tools in "unconscious or habitual" ways (Chapter 22). One of our great fears is that the use of GenAI in the writing center will limit critical thinking in favor of fast, product-oriented work, a sentiment echoed by tutors in a study by Kristina Aikens and Hannah Weildon. Therefore, our goal is to teach writers to be intentional about their use of GenAI so that they understand how this technology complements, not replaces, the writing process. And clearly this mandates the

additional training for tutors in using this technology with a "metacognitive" approach, so that tutors can help writers see the potential of GenAI in writing while "emphasizing the importance of … human connection" (Craig). These trainings ensure that tutors and writers see GenAI as a supplement to the human act of writing and not a substitute.

PRIMING WRITERS FOR GenAI USE

It is important to remind ourselves that developing critical inquiry (a central value of a writing center) and generating responses (a primary ability of GenAI) are not necessarily at odds with one another; they're just categorically different. The way writing centers *and* GenAI function is notably similar in one key way— critical inquiry is developed, and answers are generated through questions and conversation. When a user opens a new chat with Google's Gemini or OpenAI's ChatGPT, they are asked "How can I help you today?" a question and interface that frames the interaction between user and anthropomorphized GenAI as somewhere between a search and a conversation.

In these acts of questioning and responding, we see an opportunity for writers to extend the work of writing centers using GenAI. So, how might we teach writers the skills of the tutor to transfer out of the center in individual writing time? Using Thompson and Mackiewicz's taxonomy of writing center questions as a guide, there are two categories of informational questioning that writers can adopt for themselves in chats with GenAI about their work: (1) knowledge deficit questions (with significant caveats around asking GenAI factual information, as they are still prone to hallucinations), despite industry advances (Metz and Weise), and (2) leading and scaffolding questions, particularly those that push writers forward in revising and brainstorming.

Writerly awareness and use of these questions can transfer knowledge out of writing center sessions, developing a writer's critical inquiry. They also recognize GenAI for what they're good for—generating answers. In their sessions with writers, tutors teach writing skills, certainly, but also flag ways to transfer the writing skills discussed. Since awareness of learning is essential for knowledge transfer, we must train tutors to point to the ways that questions are used in center sessions and how these questioning skills can be used with GenAI outside of a writing center. Specific training on how questioning works in GenAI and in tutoring sessions can help writers to differentiate among the questions that they can ask GenAI and the questions they can only ask a tutor. For example, a tutor may note the *informational* questions the writer is asking (about genre conventions, grammatical accuracy, etc.) and the *social* questions (the "common ground," "social coordination," and "conversation control" types of questions,

from Thompson and Mackiewicz's taxonomy). At the end of a session, a tutor might then ask a writer to think about, and perhaps write down, which questions are only useful in a session with a tutor and which ones could be productively posed to GenAI.

Writers can easily ask informational, knowledge-deficit style questions of GenAI, e.g., "Should I use 'affect' or 'effect' in this sentence?" "What is a synonym of revolutionary?" While GenAI cannot respond accurately to all knowledge deficit questions, they excel in relaying genre conventions, grammar and mechanics, and vocabulary, all types of linguistic patterns that GenAI are trained to recognize and reconstitute.

The other category of questions in which GenAI may become a productive interlocutor is informational scaffolding questions. As Thompson and Mackiewicz write, "scaffolding occurs through pumping, prompting, referring to a previous discussion, providing alternatives, responding as a reader, and paraphrasing" (43) — e.g., "How can I elaborate on XYZ?" or "What is a counterpoint to ABC?" These are all types of commands that many already make to GenAI, as chats build upon themselves, working with existing digital literacies for search and GenAI use. They also allow for students to operate metacognitively on their own writing, priming them for transfer and developing critical inquiry into their own work.

Writing center tutors (with training) can play an essential role in this process, not only working with writers to improve their immediate writing projects but also equipping them with questioning strategies that can be applied independently. Tutors can first teach writers how to frame and assess inquiries (informational or social) into their own writing throughout a session, as questions arise throughout from both tutor and writer. They may then encourage writers to distinguish categories of questions that may (and may not!) be useful to pose to GenAI, asking writers to write down questions that they might use on their own with GenAI during later writing sessions. We see here that tutor intervention within a writing center session becomes a critical step in facilitating transfer, and sessions may productively include time spent questioning GenAI, framing GenAI as "partners" or complements to our writing center sessions, as Eric Mason and Kevin Dvorak write in this collection. This metacognitive work, facilitated by writing center tutors, also implicitly underscores a deeper truth about writing for critical inquiry—that its social nature can never be fully separated from its communicative or informational value. There are places, times, and tools for each piece of the 'writing for critical inquiry' puzzle. The distinctions we make between question types and the appropriate contexts for asking them to recognize this, while encouraging writerly fluidity and agility along the way.

After a session ends, writers are offered a post-session document to help them think about ways that they will continue working on their next steps in completing the text worked on in the session. In the form of questions, this document mimics the social nature of the session and points to ways that digital resources, including GenAI, can be used to aid the writing process.

This is reinforced in a post-session survey, where writers are asked two questions focused on transfer: (1) "What are the next steps you will take in finishing your paper?" and (2) "Have you and/or will you use ChatGPT or other GenAI in working on this paper? If yes, how might these tools assist in your writing process?" The first question allows writers to come up with a concrete work plan for themselves, using what they learned from their session to initiate transfer. The second reinforces that there is a role for GenAI in the writing for critical inquiry process.

Taken together, these writing center interventions can prime writers to ask the right types of questions of their own writing in the variety of contexts where writing happens. We propose that writers can also be prompted to transfer questioning skills to time outside the center, when they are already turning to GenAI, deadlines are looming, and writing centers are closed. And, since GenAI is designed to respond to questions and commands, it becomes a powerful tool in allowing writers to metacognitively engage with their own work. After a writing center session in the days (or night) before an assignment is due, a writer might productively turn to GenAI with informational questions, focused on both knowledge deficits and scaffolding: "Is this introduction in keeping with genre standards for a policy brief?"; "How can I transition between these two paragraphs?" These interactions allow writers to think more deeply about their writing choices and to approach revisions flexibly and metacognitively. In using GenAI's capacity to answer informational questions in this way, writers *support* the development of critical inquiry into their own writing, not detract from it.

As Yancey et al. have pointed out, an important condition for successful transfer is that writers are aware that the goal of their work, in this case, a writing center session, is to transfer that knowledge to new spaces, perhaps even the chatbot windows of GenAI ("The Teaching for Transfer Curriculum" 291). A key component of writing center sessions is that tutors make writers aware that the work they are doing is not limited to a particular text; the work has broader implications for writerly development. In essence, with the right priming, writers can use GenAI for targeted questions of their own writing, while maintaining the centrality of the writing center session to the kind of dialectical conversation that humans can only do.

GenAI is here to stay. And as James M. Cochran, Kathryn Pilliod, and Madilynne Smith point out in this collection, writing centers have an obligation

to maintain candid conversations about how writers are using GenAI. Though more research is needed on current GenAI adoption rates in higher education, a 2025 study from the UK states that 92 percent of students surveyed report using GenAI in some form (Freeman), echoing the results of Joe Essid and Cady Cummins work from 2025 that found that 91 percent of students surveyed at their university employed GenAI in their writing process. As GenAI integration into word processing software increases and the quality and proliferation of GenAI improve, these adoption rates are only likely to rise. Recognizing the realities of GenAI adoption in higher educational settings, writing centers should not reject their use but should instead consider integrating them into their work in a thoughtful, critical, and cautious manner that supports their existing work. At writing centers, we are already heavily invested in writing for critical inquiry, developing writers who are equipped to dwell in "productive uncertainty" with their ideas, questioning, refining, and expanding their work through conversation (Vee 177). By understanding what GenAI can and cannot do, we can integrate them into the writing process through questioning in a way that complements and enhances writing for critical inquiry, in and outside of writing center sessions. Tutors can guide writers to use GenAI as tools to question their own work, ensuring that students maintain ownership of their ideas and engage critically with their writing. This approach creates a space for the transfer of writing process knowledge, empowering writers to discern the types of support GenAI can offer and what is better left for human interaction or conversation (i.e., a writing center visit). By incorporating GenAI thoughtfully, writing centers can adopt a both/and approach that acknowledges both our technological reality and our goal to develop and support critical inquiry in our writers.

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