CHAPTER 21. LOOPING GENERATIVE AI INTO WRITING CENTER CONSULTATIONS

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Writing center studies has historically provided a home to critical conversations on the practical integration of new digital and physical technologies into writing pedagogy, from word processors to networked computer labs to hypertext (e.g., see Harris, "From"; Pemberton; Palmquist). As both a university service and an advocate of responsible writing pedagogy, building partnerships amongst faculty, administration, and students, writing centers are "encouraged to embrace new technology ... [even when] this technology challenges the traditional ethos of the writing center" (Neaderhiser and Wolfe 50). Part of this role is managing anxiety surrounding new technologies, but such engagement is also self-interested: writing centers that do not embrace new composing technologies "will find themselves no longer in sync with how writers write and with what writers need to know about writing processes" (Harris, "Making Up" 194). While many see generative AI (GenAI) as a challenge to writing center ethos and operations—often fearing students will use GenAI *instead* of going to the writing center—such disruptions also mark the emergence of opportunities for professionals (including writing consultants) able to integrate GenAI into their workflows. This chapter traces our attempt to do this.

As leaders of a writing center at a Research 1 (R1) university serving 20,000+ students who supervise 80 peer and professional consultants who conduct 10,000+ individual consultations each year, we have been interested in how GenAI might be productively integrated into the work we do in ways that prioritize centering the humans working there while also having a positive impact on student learning. According to a 2025 McKinsey Global Survey of 1,491 respondents across 101 countries, 71 percent reported using GenAI for at least one business function (Singla et al.). Thus, if we believe, as Sidney I. Dobrin claims is increasingly true, that "college and university students need to learn and practice the forms of writing they're more likely to produce in their careers" (84), then use of GenAI should be integrated across the curriculum and in writing centers. If our students are to become more adept at using GenAI for writing

in their professions, we believe writing center consultants must also become skilled in utilizing GenAI (when appropriate) during consultations. The academic and professional context of writing center work demands it.

While some are excited to embrace this new technology (perhaps even uncritically), there will always be productive and expected resistance. Since ChatGPT launched, we have seen many faculty condemn the use of GenAI, pointing to its ability to compromise academic integrity, hinder authenticity, and disrupt learning as we have known it—since the last technological upheaval, that is. And the writing center community is not above such "cries of moral crisis" (Dobrin 5). As Peter Carino claims, writing centers have long been home to a productive "tension between technological endorsement and technological resistance" (qtd. in Neaderhiser and Wolfe 68). This moment surrounding GenAI can be an opportunity for writing centers to demonstrate leadership on campuses by positioning themselves as invaluable specialists within the university's conversation about how to respond to the emergence of GenAI. To do so, however, requires exploration with available tools and engagement with interested stakeholders.

Recognizing the opportunity to provide leadership during a moment of confusion, we decided to facilitate a writing center-based learning community on the topic of GenAI. During the first year, we invited members from 10 of the university's 14 colleges, as well as colleagues from the university's Learning and Education Center, to explore how GenAI was being deployed in various disciplines and discuss how the writing center might help faculty and students navigate the use of GenAI throughout the writing process.

In this chapter, we discuss two initiatives that emerged from our learning community: (1) development of training to help consultants use GenAI in ways that maintained the conversational focus of the writing center experience, and (2) attempts to customize ChatGPT to participate in these conversations in ethical ways.

DESIGNING THE HUMAN-CENTERED CONSULTING LOOP

In October of 2023, at the 18th annual United Nations Internet Governance Forum in Kyoto, Japan, a statement of principles was released to guide the integration of AI into higher education. The first principle was that "People, not technology, must be at the center of our work" ("Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education"). This not only matches well the ethos of the traditional writing center, where conversations typically support the work and voices of students and technology is secondary, but it echoes a host of work on "human-centered" approaches to working with AI that consider how systems can be designed so

AI works alongside humans in ways that preserve the dignity and importance of humans in these systems (Riedl 33).

In thinking about how to integrate GenAI into writing center work while maintaining focus on student needs for development and on institutional demands for academic integrity, we found it useful to consider writing center work via the concept of "workflows." Workflows are representations of the steps needed to complete a task. They allow stakeholders (designers, analysts, administrators, etc.) to break down complex processes into manageable steps to allow for more efficient analysis and improvement. Many of the information systems developed in the US in the 1970s when workflow studies came to prominence promised (and delivered) increased productivity, but were later considered too "rigid" because they failed to recognize the need for workers to "creatively violate, augment, or circumvent the standard office procedures when appropriate" (Ellis and Nutt 2).

This need for less structured and flexible representations of processes is manifest in the many representations one finds of the writing process as a recursive loop. In such a loop, the writer is free to return to an earlier part of the workflow at any time. The loop structure thus acknowledges the writer's responsibility to decide how the process will proceed, not merely to follow a rigid series of linear steps. It is this responsibility to manage a workflow that we observe every time a writing consultant works with a student and helps them decide what part of the writing process to focus on. We consider the possibility of collaborating with GenAI as part of the writing process loop to be just one more decision consultants and students can make.

In Nupoor Ranade and Douglas Eyman's special issue of *Computers and Composition* about "composing with generative AI," they identified human-in-the-loop (HITL) approaches as potentially leading to "improved quality of generated text, reduced risk of generating inaccurate or harmful text, and increased user satisfaction" and called for "more approaches within composition to demonstrate how humans and AI can collaborate harmoniously, with humans at the center and AI functioning as assistants" (3). But while HITL approaches sound like they would be automatically human-centered, their application can be lacking when compared to other approaches.

HITL approaches *can* help make systems fairer and more equitable, for instance, by acknowledging the important role of humans in creating and improving such systems, and providing a basis for renumerating them for the data and "fine-tuning" they provide (Zanzotto 243). And AI designers often embrace the idea of HITL approaches as ways to improve machine learning by gathering human input at strategic moments in the process, or as ways to alleviate customer anxiety over the potential excesses, biases, or inconsistencies of AI

by assigning final decision-making to a human. This latter approach, however, often reduces the input of a human to a final check on the work primarily done by the machine itself, like a human inspector placing a sticker on a machine-made product, assessing its quality before it is shipped. If the pedagogical value of writing to students is based on engagement throughout the writing process, not just any HITL approach can be used as a model.

Thus, we acknowledge that not all loops are equal, and scholars such as Alan Knowles now recommend moving away from human-in-the-loop (HITL) approaches and toward machine-in-the-loop (MITL) approaches. Knowles calls HITL approaches a "baseline" ethical workflow (3); in other words, they represent the minimum amount of human involvement in a process that might still be considered ethical. Rather than embrace processes where human input plays a minimal role, he argues that the "ideal AI collaborative writing model" is some form of MITL approach where "human collaborator(s) retain majority of the rhetorical load" (3). In other words, MITL approaches to writing intentionally place machines at the margins of decision making and control over writing processes, where they function in a support role when useful, but are rarely asked to complete large stretches of the writing process autonomously. These processes are, in a word, "human-centered." MITL approaches thus mimic what we might call writing centers' current "consultant-in-the-loop" process, where the student maintains control over the writing and the consultant serves in a support role. Central to this support role and human-centeredness is how writing center consultations are structured as conversations.

ENTERING THE GenAI-IN-THE-LOOP CONVERSATION

Conversational metaphors are useful descriptors of both the writing process as a whole and the research process in particular, helping students imagine the relationship between previously published scholarship and their own voices. Additionally, in the writing center, conversations are the literal method for engaging students in revision of their own writing—a way to maintain student control over the texts while asking supportive and critical questions that prompt development.

Advice about how to use GenAI effectively often refers to the importance of prompt engineering, a process that focuses much attention on the comprehensive and specific initial prompt given to an AI platform and designed to solicit the anticipated response. But conversations are not determined by an opening statement; they can begin vague and skeptical, working from general statements or premises, and still function as effective conversations. They can meander and falter and reiterate and still serve their purpose. Thinking of how GenAI can

contribute to the *conversations* going on in writing centers related to student writing led us to start developing consultant AI training by exploring various platforms' affordances as conversational participants.

Our first activity asked consultants to simply have a conversation with a GenAI platform, and to reflect on the direction and scope of the results. Conversation is, after all, the core of writing center work, where talking with a student about their ideas and their writing is just as important as the words that wind up on the page. Having consultants converse with GenAI and asking them to examine the results of requesting that the platform converse in the persona of historical figures or individuals with professional backgrounds, focuses attention on how AI can perform a particular function within the writing center space that goes beyond simply being a ghostwriter.

As one consultant reported after completing this activity, such unstructured conversations with GenAI seem like they could be helpful during a consultation "when one is struggling to look at [a topic] from varying points of view … engaging with the AI can aid in clarifying one's own beliefs and articulating those beliefs in a more descriptive and knowledgeable way" ("Reflection on 'Conversational AI'"). This is, we believe, what happens between writing consultants and students working at the invention stage on texts where the student's beliefs about the topic matter, but the complexity of the issue may prevent easy identification of a thesis or position.

By including GenAI in the conversational loop, consultants can ask GenAI to participate as someone with a certain perspective on an issue, for example, or can ask it to identify the most likely arguments and counterarguments to a possible thesis as a way to move a conversation forward. In such cases, GenAI is being asked to be the "machine in the loop," not to take over a process where humans only participate at the end point. By modeling such methods during the consultation, consultants' ethical and effective uses of GenAI can more easily be transferred to students' writing processes outside of the writing center space. The collaborative decision between consultant and student about when to use GenAI, and the collaborative evaluation of its output, models a recursive loop where humans remain in control of the process rather than merely initiating or ending a linear workflow in which GenAI does all of the work.

Further training activities asked consultants to explore the affordances of AI in regards to diverse genres, from argument to art, in order to identify the capabilities and limitations of different platforms, and to discern the role of the prompt in shaping the output one receives. These are essential skills for anyone using GenAI, but placed in the context of writing center work, we felt that beginning with GenAI's aptitude for conversation could focus attention not on what *it* can do, but on what *students* can do by interacting with it. Later activities

focused on assessing the ability of GenAI to participate in specific recurrent moments in the writing process, from brainstorming to editing, and reflecting on the ethical implications of such usage. Here is where Knowles' concept of "rhetorical load sharing" in relation to MITL approaches draws attention to the ways in which we may or may not want to allow GenAI to be responsible for certain rhetorical tasks. It seems novel to be using GenAI tools "as virtual brainstorming partners, encouraging critical thinking and enhancing the writing process" (Krasova and Othman). But we've always dealt with such load sharing in the writing center space, where even working with another human being "raises ethical questions of the tutor's doing too much of the work for the student" (Neaderhiser and Wolfe 50). GenAI provides simply another opportunity to apply our expertise in managing these kinds of collaborations.

CUSTOMIZING THE GenAI-IN-THE-LOOP CONVERSATION

The ability to customize how GenAI platforms generally respond to prompts (rather than making this part of the prompt itself) was drawn to our attention when a member of our AI learning community presented the results of his trying to turn ChatGPT into a math tutor using its "custom instructions" feature. This feature allows you to set parameters the platform will follow in all interactions, over and above the specifics of the prompt itself. The results were mixed, but the ability to limit the platform's abilities—to keep it from simply solving a problem for you, and directing it instead to help you solve the problem—made us wonder whether a similar approach could be used to customize GenAI tools as writing tutors. Since our early attempts, OpenAI has released its "Custom GPT" functionality, in which users can both customize and publicly share their customized versions with subscribed users. But even nonpaying users can still add custom instructions to influence their own chats, and the process of writing one's own instructions is, we think, an incredibly useful way for writing center staff to reflect on their own approach to consultations and can facilitate the introduction of GenAI into the writing center space in ways that do not disturb the human-centered nature of our work.

Our initial attempt to customize ChatGPT in this way is shown below and was modeled on our colleague's instructions for an AI math tutor:

> Act as a writing tutor. Your user is a college freshman taking college composition. Use the Socratic method to help the student brainstorm ideas for writing projects and start the drafting process. Help them understand the demands of writing in response to a prompt and for a specific audience.

> Only give one step at a time. The goal is to have the student write the paper on their own with guidance, but also to help the student understand the process and why their method is correct or incorrect.
>
> Rule: Break the process down to one step at a time. Ask the student what to do in each step. When they answer with a correct method, have them complete the step before asking about the next step.
>
> Rule: Do not give away the correct answer until the student figures it out on their own.
>
> Rule: Ask questions to the student to help understand their thinking and how they are coming upon their answers.
>
> Rule: Use words of encouragement as you guide students.

The fact that these parameters were modeled on instructions for helping students solve math problems accounts for the mention of things like "steps" and "correct answers" in ways that do not necessarily fit the typical view of the writing process. But the focus on asking questions, providing encouragement, and guiding the student to do the writing rather than doing the writing for them were all elements that we found fit our sense of what writing consultations sought to achieve.

Over time, we rewrote and tested different versions of these instructions, removing things such as references to "correct" answers. Other revisions addressed moments natural to conversations among humans that we wanted ChatGPT to emulate. What do humans do, for instance, when someone says something to them that they don't quite understand? Do they usually just barrel forward, or do they ask for clarification? Since ChatGPT's eagerness to please might limit its willingness to follow up a question with another question, we directly told it to do so by adding the following instruction:

> If a request is unclear or ambiguous, ask for more details to confirm your understanding before responding.

And, as our consultants already do, and like many of our composition teachers advocate during peer review sessions, we wanted to make sure questions that prompted development were featured, so we added this instruction as well:

> After a response, provide three follow-up questions of your own. Format in bold as Q1, Q2, and Q3. Place two-line breaks ("\n") before and after each question for spacing. These questions should be thought-provoking and dig further into

the original topic, drawing our attention to aspects that have
not been mentioned previously.

These questions provided opportunities for students and consultants to consider avenues of potential development based on the current conversation. Over time, our instructions incorporated more of the formatting rules you see here as well, simply to improve the readability and usability of the output. The process of customization led to consultants imagining how GenAI could be used in different ways in different contexts. As one asked after using GenAI to suggest sentence-level revisions: "How can we look for ways to customize GenAI tools to align with specific styles or tones of writing that are necessary for certain genres or assignments?" ("Reflection on 'Editing Sentences with AI'").

One last observation about our initial attempt to customize the AI conversation: we assumed in our earliest instructions that GenAI would act "as a writing tutor." But even such a simple instruction raised numerous questions: What does being a "writing tutor" mean (to GenAI and to us)? What models did GenAI have access to for how to act in this way, and what biases or limitations might emerge based on such directions? And did we even want GenAI to duplicate the role of the consultant in the room working with a student? If one of our goals was to *not* have GenAI replace us as writing tutors, why would we ask it to be/do exactly that? What we realized is that, even if we were never able to produce perfect instructions for a Custom GPT that could replace or support our writing center work, the very process of attempting to customize GenAI platforms by putting our desires into language was a rich experience in articulating our values, exploring our practices, and understanding how humans and technology co-create the workflow loops that delimit human-centered activities in the writing center.

CONCLUSION

Writing centers have an incredible opportunity right now to shape discourse and practice surrounding the integration of GenAI into college curricula and university operations. Even in much of the scholarship and policies now being produced, the typical scene is still too often one of a solitary author working with a GenAI platform and the ethics of transparently sharing that pseudo-private experience with teachers, employers, or readers. By expanding the consideration of workflow loops to include the more social and supportive setting of the writing center, in which conversations about writing between multiple humans can be augmented by GenAI, we believe that MITL approaches to GenAI can maintain the human-centeredness of the writing center space as we explore the affordances of yet another new writing technology.

As we grow more familiar with GenAI and it becomes normalized in academic writing and writing center praxis, we must continue to assess how students and tutors are utilizing it in both their writing and in their consultations to ensure we proceed effectively and ethically. GenAI will likely affect the whole ecology of writing center praxis, from how individual consultations are conducted to how we train consultants, how we produce online resources and marketing, and how we manage consultants and course-embedded fellows programs. By paying attention to the differences in how we accomplish these with and without GenAI and by exploring the ways in which we can customize such interactions, we believe writing centers can serve as campus leaders in the use of GenAI. As Sarah Z. Johnson and Sherry Wynn Perdue (this collection) argue, writing center professionals need to identify "allies" and develop "partnerships" across campuses and communities in order to "navigate—and survive" within institutions disrupted by GenAI. But doing so may require us to first ally with GenAI as a partner within the consultation space itself.

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