CHAPTER 25. RECENTERING WRITING CENTERS TO ADDRESS THE HIDDEN GenAI CURRICULUM

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In response to the rapid rise of GenAI, we sent out an exploratory, informal survey to our staff of peer writing tutors to understand their experiences and expectations thus far. We expected a range of responses but were unprepared by how uneven our tutors were in terms of their familiarity with and feelings towards generative AI and large language models (LLMs) (subsequently referred to as GenAI). These were top-notch students, hired for their writing proficiency and problem-solving abilities, raised in a world full of fast-paced technological changes, and accustomed to online learning and new platforms that became prominent during a pandemic. However, after this informal survey of our staff about their comfort with common digital tools and platforms, including GenAI, it became immediately clear that there was no consensus on how our tutors felt about GenAI and writing. In fact, most tutors did not feel equipped to help students navigate GenAI. Moreover, nearly half of the tutors surveyed reported wanting to improve their skills with Microsoft Word, a standard program used on our Microsoft campus. We began to wonder how we might approach bringing tutors up to speed on GenAI literacy when their digital literacy skills were already flagging. Our tutors were clearly familiar with numerous platforms, devices, and digital technologies. However, these tools remained unfamiliar in meaningful ways.

Foundational to GenAI literacy, digital literacy is built on an amalgam of previously developed literacies; personal experimentation; peer, home, school, and workplace use; and intentional education. This combination of exposure forms a distinct foundation for each learner. Some foundations are robust and well-rounded. On the other hand, some foundations are uneven. Learners with limited access to digital technologies have fewer chances to explore, perpetuating the digital divide, "the division between people who have access and use of digital media and those who do not" (van Dijk 1). It may seem that every

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student has exposure and access and thus skills to use digital tools, but this is still not the case. While it is unrealistic to aim for total uniformity in digital literacy, differences matter a great deal. In the context of writing center work, it is essential to ensure that our centers are one of the places in which this foundation can be added to, a task that increasingly requires the inclusion of GenAI literacy curriculum in the writing center. Indeed, assumptions that GenAI can be used effectively independent of intentional learning processes are risky at best and dangerous at worst, as all literacies rely on a network of connected experiences, contexts, and efforts to learn. With GenAI "now inextricably part of how students will write in the academy and beyond" (Dobrin 20) and "an inextricable part of our writing center environments" (Cheatle, "TPR"), writing center educators must acknowledge and contend with GenAI's impact on writing and learning. Moving forward, the work of writing centers must include recentering literacies, including digital literacy, as central to writing and supporting writers. While GenAI literacy should be explicitly taught in higher education, writing centers are uniquely poised to contend with the hidden GenAI curriculum of experiential learning, layered literacies, and metacognition.

DEFINING AND CONTEXTUALIZING GENAI LITERACY

GenAI literacy is impossible to separate from digital literacy and issues of the digital divide. Basic access to reliable internet, up-to-date digital devices, and peers and mentors who have advanced digital literacy skills are not a given for college students. For students, this lack of access creates an invisible yet powerful barrier to developing GenAI literacy. Digital disparities are exacerbated by the digital branch of the hidden curriculum, which includes the largely unspoken, invisible knowledge necessary to use digital tools effectively in the context of higher education. Students must be proficient in a wide range of digital communication and learning platforms, including proficiency with campus-wide software, email professionalism, online course content, discussion boards, assignment feedback, library databases, and managing student accounts for registration, tuition, and personal contact information. Without prior experience with numerous platforms and tools, learners have a steeper learning curve when it comes to GenAI literacy, given that the layered literacies and metacognition surrounding it may be out of reach. GenAI may appear seamless, but behind their smooth interfaces are numerous complex principles and strategies that users must apply to use them well. If educators do not face the problem of inaccessible technology and the hidden curriculum head on, many students will be left behind as GenAI literacy becomes an expectation.

GenAI literacy extends beyond whether a user can input content into a GenAI program. To be considered GenAI literate, a user must understand

how GenAI works on a technical level, its benefits and limitations, and how GenAI literacy develops. Thus, GenAI literacy consists of a combination of critical thinking, metacognition, technical understanding, and creativity, all of which must be employed together for GenAI to be used ethically and effectively. GenAI tools use large datasets as training data, and they use machine learning to constantly take in and apply new information, which should improve the quality of its output over time. However, part of GenAI literacy is understanding that the datasets LLMs are trained on are already imperfect; they contain biases, stereotypes, and misinformation. As Joe Essid explains, GenAI ultimately lacks humanistic values, despite being trained on plenty of human-made data (39). These humanistic values include the principles of fair use, active listening, and metacognitive questioning. Moreover, GenAI lacks an inherent "human respect for scholarship" (Essid 39). Overall, GenAI literacy helps learners to use GenAI tools while understanding the ways in which human thinking is distinctly different and equally important (*Bloom's Taxonomy* Ecampus). This is of particular importance in a writing center context where we deeply value human interaction and learning how to learn (Cecil-Lemkin and Marvel Johnson).

Understanding the difference between elements of GenAI literacy connected to the hidden curriculum and elements of GenAI literacy that are still developing is key for writing center professionals if we want to form a genuine understanding of GenAI literacy. The developing elements of GenAI literacy include distinct skills connected to GenAI tools, many of which are too new to have been integrated into foundational pedagogical practices. As Salena Sampson Anderson urges, "the need for digital literacy for large language models could not be more pressing" at a time when higher education is in the throes of GenAI tool uptake and decision-making (2). To foster this digital literacy for LLMs, or GenAI literacy, we must understand GenAI literacy as a layered literacy, in which new and advanced skills build upon older and simpler ones. Again, GenAI literacy relies on digital literacy. In turn, digital literacy relies on information literacy, which relies on traditional literacy, etc. If lacking proficiency in one of the layered literacies, learners will encounter more roadblocks as they forge ahead using GenAI technology. Without this understanding, the disconnects in the network of learners, educators, and technologies will likely increase.

DISCONNECTS AND GenAI LITERACY

Across the disciplines, there is no shared standard for GenAI curriculum, which is exacerbated by disciplinary differences. Disconnects in the disciplines stem from distinct industry standards, evolving public and academic scholarship, and emerging conventions within individual fields. A student may attend a business

or STEM class and be told that if they are not already proficient with GenAI, they are behind the curve and may not be employable. A few hours later, that same student may sit in a visual arts or English class and be told that any use of GenAI amounts to pure plagiarism. The whiplash in disciplinary disconnects and messaging are both cognitively confusing and emotionally exhausting for learners trying to navigate the complex and often high-stakes landscape of GenAI uptake and literacy.

There is also a disconnect between the speed of digital development and the time needed for deep learning. Inevitably, one of the draws of GenAI is the speed with which it generates content. However, users may conflate speed with accuracy, placing increased confidence in GenAI output based on speed, resulting in stagnating GenAI literacy (Tankelevitch et al.). Also, the rate at which GenAI appears on campuses may not account for the uneven rate at which students and faculty learn and develop new literacies. Deep learning takes time and effort. With the speed of GenAI platforms, university administrators and educators cannot afford to confuse the output of products for proof of learning. In the face of rapid GenAI expansion and integration, educators must take time to learn and develop GenAI literacy in order to guide students through the same process, an approach that Felicitas Hartung and Christine Sharp call "AI Readiness" (2025). This seems especially true within writing centers as interdisciplinary, multiliteracy spaces, dedicated to supporting writers and learners with differing levels of literacy.

WRITING CENTERS AS PLACES OF CONNECTION, LITERACIES, AND LEARNING

In many ways, writing centers are prepared to bridge gaps and address the hidden curriculum of GenAI literacy. Even as writing centers grapple with where, how, and why (or why not) to engage with GenAI as a tool for writing (Dobrin 47-61; Lunsford) and tutoring writing (Lester 21-23), adapting and retooling is familiar writing center work. In fact, peer tutors are used to working as "expert outsiders" (Nowacek and Hughes 181) and engaging in multiliteracy work. Within writing consultations, tutors and writers read texts closely, evaluate and integrate sources, format assignments, connect to campus resources, validate emotion, and troubleshoot technology as regular parts of writing and learning. Additionally, peer tutors may be more poised to discuss and understand students' use of GenAI than faculty or administrators whose roles and accompanying power dynamics (e.g., grades and policies) may keep them from candid conversations with learners. Peer tutors can encourage exploration and experimentation with GenAI, with a focus on the learner and the process, rather than a product. Writing center administrators

(WCAs) are also uniquely positioned to contribute to GenAI conversations on campus by viewing and seeking to understand GenAI literacy practices, pedagogy, and possibilities across disciplinary divides (Velez et al.; Cheatle, "Leading"). While departments and disciplines are often isolated, writing centers benefit from the range of relationships they have with writers and educators across campus. Writing centers facilitate transfer of learning and help bridge gaps between students and faculty, faculty and administrators, students and campus resources, etc. Writing centers address disparities in learning, access, and exposure through individualized support, experiential learning, and literacy development.

Unlike with GenAI use, in writing centers, writing and learning processes slow down, and learners engage in the metacognitive work of planning, experimenting, practicing, and evaluating their work and development. While using GenAI may reduce the cognitive load of completing academic assignments, GenAI use actually demands an increase in metacognition (Tankelevitch et al.), including the ability to plan and guide GenAI through the prompting process and evaluate GenAI output. These metacognitive demands are a key element of the hidden GenAI curriculum. As Essid notes, "AI … favors product over process and cannot spur metacognitive thinking" (47), at least not by engaging in metacognitive discussions as an active and empathetic listener and co-learner. As scholars promote the use of GenAI personas as tutors (Benharrak et al.; Mollick 138-42), they do so assuming writers have developed the underlying literacies and metacognition fundamental for GenAI literacy. This may not be the case. As GenAI increasingly intertwines with academic writing, writing centers will be places where students' GenAI literacy, as a new literacy, is encountered and addressed in ways that are both learner- and learning-centered.

RECENTERING DIGITAL LITERACY AS PART OF WRITING

Writing centers cannot assist learners in developing GenAI literacy if tutors and administrators lack digital literacy. Many writing centers already include multiliteracy as a key element of their programs, and these centers have made strides in incorporating digital literacy into their work (Cheatle and Sheridan 4), some since the early 2000s (Trimbur 89). Foundational digital literacy is critical for students to fully engage in the university learning environment. Without these basic digital literacy skills, students may struggle with coursework, leading to a cycle of disengagement, stagnation, frustration, and shame due to unspoken expectations. Overlooking digital literacy gaps, an acute symptom of the ongoing digital divide, springs from the assumption that students are digital natives (Eynon 131-34), a dubious stereotype frequently employed in both popular and academic discourse. Many students *are* deft users of specific platforms and

technologies; however, variability in skill levels is inevitable and can be addressed in writing centers.

As we were reminded when surveying our staff, every learner has a different foundation of digital literacy skills. Understanding this is essential for effective writing tutoring in the digital age. The evaluation of a learner's digital literacy can be easily incorporated into a tutorial using a transfer of the skills that tutors already employ. Just like a tutor will ask the learner about their assignment, their understanding of course materials, and their goals for their work, tutors can also ask learners about their familiarity with digital tools and platforms, their confidence using various software, and their prior experience with learning new systems. By attending to the digital literacies that directly impact a learner's ability to both write and engage in course materials, writing center tutors can help to stabilize and fortify learners' digital literacy foundations. The same is true for WCAs, who can assess and address the digital literacy gaps of individual tutors and help them prepare to assist other learners in developing digital and GenAI literacies.

WCAs and tutors do not always see the clear connection between digital literacy and writing help, which is understandable. Writing centers have worked hard to be seen as experts in writing, often leaving support for additional literacies to other programs and omitting training in these areas from the writing center curriculum. However, to increase WCAs' ability to help tutors develop digital literacy and tutors' ability to help writers with basic digital literacy skills necessary for developing GenAI literacy, we must make visible the ways in which writing is enmeshed with technology and empower writing center educators to help bridge digital literacy gaps. As Joy Bancroft notes, "most sessions involve[d] interaction with, if not instruction on, using computers" (47). We saw the same with our tutors but noticed that they often described technology support and writing support as mutually exclusive rather than interconnected. Normalizing and naming the ways writing centers provide digital literacy support is an excellent place to start. This work might include mapping the tools that a learner used in a tutorial (laptop, smartphone, learning management system, operating system, word processor, digital textbook, etc.) and noting challenges or friction impacting writing and learning. Developing our own digital literacy and helping our tutors see digital literacy assistance as part of, not separate from writing support, has been vital. To address digital literacy with tutors, we have implemented a flipped-classroom curriculum that guides tutors to see their own digital literacy gaps. In addition to shared and guided practice with technology, tutors engage with a "choose your own digital literacy adventure" training that caters to the range of pre-existing knowledge they have, while encouraging them to increase their digital literacy with a specific tool. Simultaneously, tutors are encouraged to reflect on and see digital literacy as a vital part of tutoring and writing.

INTEGRATING GenAI LITERACY INTO WRITING CENTER EDUCATION

Just as educators across campus cannot assume students enter classrooms with established GenAI literacy, WCAs cannot assume tutors know GenAI literacy basics. While we do not require the use of GenAI tools among our tutors, we model and offer guidance for exploring GenAI and engaging with GenAI in practical ways within tutorials. Since GenAI literacy is not a natural skillset, WCAs and tutors should participate in structured training to grasp how GenAI works, acknowledge the ethical considerations of GenAI use, and understand how GenAI may be applied across a range of disciplines. This training may include hands-on experimentation and writing center scenarios in which tutors and learners engage with GenAI during brainstorming, research, drafting, revision, and editing processes. However, if writing centers are to recalibrate to address the hidden GenAI curriculum, they must address experiential learning, layered literacies, and metacognition as central writing center work.

For GenAI literacy to become an established and visible part of writing center work, it must be integrated into writing center education. Based on our survey of staff members' feelings about GenAI, we understand that a nuanced and multifaceted approach is needed. Additionally, we view it as essential to ensure that WCAs and tutors understand why learners might bring GenAI writing and tools into a session. This may help them avoid judgment or fear about what to do with GenAI-generated or assisted work. In addition to addressing layered literacies, as a writing center staff, we have collaboratively developed resources on GenAI use for our campus community, which has required WCAs and tutors to explore and think both critically and practically about GenAI across the disciplines. We have mentored tutors in metacognitively considering GenAI literacy via scholarship on GenAI and learning (Alsharif; Craig et al.; Lester) while participating in this same professional practice of writing and presenting to learn. Other staff members have worked as embedded tutors within a GenAI and writing course, allowing them to reflect on, experiment with, and evaluate GenAI with both faculty and peers. In formal and informal ways, we have worked to address the hidden GenAI curriculum as part of writing center education.

As with any literacy, developing GenAI literacy is not a one-and-done process. As we begin a new academic year, we plan to further address GenAI literacy and the hidden GenAI curriculum in our writing center education. We do so, knowing we must continue to evolve as learners alongside rapidly developing GenAI technology and GenAI use across campus. As GenAI is further integrated into familiar systems and tools, it will increasingly become enmeshed with the writing process. We will continue to regularly survey our staff about their use

of and comfort with GenAI to monitor how our approach to teaching GenAI literacy can be improved. As WCAs, we will continue participating in GenAI conversations on our campus and within our field, drawing attention to the hidden GenAI curriculum. We will continue to learn as we work with our staff to develop GenAI literacy as well as learning resources and scholarship. These approaches demonstrate how we are recentering our writing center's focus to highlight the importance of metacognition, multiliteracy, and experiential learning within higher education.

CONCLUSION

As with GenAI literacy in higher education, a visible wellspring is the surface manifestation of the much larger, more complex network beneath it. This unseen network comprises critical elements of the wellspring. Similarly, while GenAI literacy is the visible outcome at the surface of what learners are expected to develop, GenAI literacy is deeply connected to experiential learning, layered literacy, and metacognition. In the writing center, tutors can work with learners to uncover elements of the hidden curriculum by spending time diving into the depths of these crucial building blocks of GenAI literacy. In contrast to the hidden curriculum, the visible curriculum consists of material explicitly taught. While a consensus is rapidly forming regarding what GenAI literacy means and how to teach it, the hidden GenAI curriculum must be addressed concurrently to support robust and meaningful GenAI literacy development. Writing centers, as interdisciplinary and multiliteracy hubs (Bancroft 46), are well positioned to support GenAI literacy and its hidden curriculum, but this support must be intentionally cultivated. To truly harness the wellspring of GenAI literacy, we must reach into the depths and confront the hidden GenAI curriculum, present but still elusive in higher education.

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