

Peripheral (Re)Visions: Moving Online Writing Centers from Margin to Center ¹

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At IWCA's 2015 conference, staff from Walden University's fully online writing center facilitated a Special Interest Group (SIG): "Refocusing the Conversation: Creating Spaces for Online Writing Center Community, Support, and Discussion." This SIG grew from conversations with other online writing center staff at past IWCA conferences in which we collectively expressed our desire for a continual, centralized space to discuss the unique needs of writing centers working with students online. SIG participants envisioned a conversational space for writing centers to discuss guiding practices, innovations, new technology, and other writing tutoring topics within distance-based learning environments. This space would specifically engage individuals conducting or planning to conduct online writing tutoring (OWT), whether as part of a fully online center, or as part of a center with both online and on-site tutoring. Based on SIG participants' feedback, in October 2016 we began building such a community by creating the OWT listserv to facilitate dialogue around online-specific issues, questions, practices, instructional resources, and conferences (Walden University Writing Center). In contrast to previous definitions of online writing labs (OWLs), which have included writing centers that only share literacy resources (e.g., blogs, handouts, text explanations, etc.) via a website ("OWLs"),² we developed the OWT acronym and listserv to specifically address methods of conducting OWT conferences with students in synchronous, asynchronous, or hybrid online formats. However, the OWT listserv provides only an initial space for addressing important, often overlooked OWT pedagogy and practice. To further such discussions, we have also partnered with the Global Society of Online Literacy Educators (GSOLE), a recent IWCA affiliate, to ensure part of the affiliate's mission within IWCA is to support OWT.³

Although the number of writing centers conducting OWT is currently unknown, the sustained growth in online post-secondary education

enrollment (Babson College), creates a corresponding need to offer equitable support services for distance-based students. This need as well as the unique instructional challenges of OWT and increased literacy load in virtual environments (Hewett, Reading to Learn 8) demand sustained discussion from an IWCA community dedicated to the development, concerns, and continued scholarship of OWT (“IWCA Mission”). To begin to address this gap in current discussion and practice, we offer this article, which traces the growth of online post-secondary education and highlights the resulting need for equitable writing support for distance-based students. To encourage such support, we call on staff engaged in OWT and the IWCA board to work toward two interrelated goals: (a) to align with IWCA’s mission by engaging with current scholarship on, reviewing best practices for, and building resources and position statements around OWT, and (b) to support the recently created IWCA OWT affiliate and collaborate to provide students with equitable writing tutoring in online environments.

ONLINE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION: CURRENT STATE

Shifting from on-site classrooms to a virtual framework of online and hybrid (with online and on-site components) courses is a sea change in higher education that has escaped few, as more and more postsecondary students are pursuing online education at both public and private institutions (Online Learning Consortium). As of 2015, more than 6 million students enrolled in at least one distance-based course (Online Learning Consortium). In that same year, despite some variations, the overall percentage of students taking distance courses increased for the thirteenth consecutive year (Babson College). However, despite the convenience, flexible program completion, and work schedule compatibility often offered in distance-based courses (Ruffalo Noel Levitz 4), online students are more likely to report dissatisfaction with and ultimately drop out of those courses than are their peers in traditional courses (Sapp and Simon 2). Some significant reasons online students provided for failure to persist are deficits in their self-determination and self-efficacy (Street 212), both of which university support services (such as writing centers, libraries, etc.) can help build. Not surprisingly, universities were more likely to see retention and student success when students deemed distance-based support services effective (LaPadula 128, Moser 16).

While online students often have less readily available institutional support than their on-site peers, those who select fully online or hybrid courses arguably need more guidance to navigate the unique challenges of learning online (Crawley and Fetzner 7). Among such challenges is the increased reliance on critical reading and writing

skills in text-heavy virtual environments (Hewett, *Reading to Learn* 8). Beth Hewett explains that students engaged in online or hybrid courses face a “rich, but heavy literacy load” (*Reading to Learn* 169), as distance-based education requires learners to read and write critically in all or most peer, interpersonal, and instructional conversations (*Reading to Learn* 8-9). If properly equipped, centers that offer OWT are well positioned to address this increased literacy load by providing students with pedagogically sound and theoretically appropriate writing support.

ONLINE WRITING SUPPORT: CURRENT STATE

The number of online students highlights the necessity for equitable academic support for this growing student population. Online Writing Instruction (OWI) Principles 13 and 14, codified by the CCCC’s Committee for Effective Practices in OWI, maintain that students taking online/hybrid courses should have access to online support resources, and staff serving these students should be trained specifically to work with students online. Correspondingly, many writing centers support students online. While determining how many centers offer online services is difficult, the 2014-2015 Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP) survey revealed that 59% of respondents offered online or virtual services (The Writing Lab & The OWL at Purdue).⁴ This increase from 53% offering online services in 2006 (Neaderhiser and Wolfe 59) excludes many centers that did not respond to the WCRP.

As online support services have spread, writing center staff have engaged in two primary modes of online tutoring—(a) *synchronous* (real-time consultant and student communication via live audio, text, or video chat) and (b) *asynchronous* (consultant and student communication at different times within a text document or email)—as well as combinations of these modes (Mick and Middlebrook 129-130). While synchronous OWT may seem more closely aligned with the dialogic, nondirective, traditional writing-center pedagogy, the best modality for OWT depends heavily on institutional contexts and students’ unique needs (Hewett, “Grounding” 81, Mick and Middlebrook 130). More importantly, centers using either or both OWT methods can transcend barriers of scheduling and geography to reach students who might not otherwise receive writing support.

ROOM FOR GROWTH IN OWT SUPPORT

As online student numbers increase, corresponding OWT scholarship and pedagogy should grow to meet student needs and drive instructional practice. In “Grounding Principles of OWI,”

Hewett explains this need as a rationale for the development of CCC's Committee for Effective Practices in OWI's *A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction* (35). However, despite broader OWI principles, popular writing center journals and tutoring manuals provide limited guidance on OWT-specific theory and effective practices. For example, some manuals briefly mention OWT, but they rely heavily on Hewett's publications (Fitzgerald and lanetta, *Oxford Guide*) or refer to OWI principles (Ryan and Zimmerelli, *Bedford Guide*) as stand-ins for OWT-specific principles. These manuals offer only one OWT chapter each. Other manuals conflate or combine OWT with special interest topics. *The Bedford Guide* combines OWT discussions with website credibility (Ryan and Zimmerelli); *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring's* OWT chapter focuses on WAC and other interdisciplinary fields (Gillespie and Lerner); and the *Oxford Guide* merges OWT with multimedia literacy tutoring (Fitzgerald and lanetta).

Reviews of popular writing center journals resulted in similar findings. Out of the 373 results generated when we searched WLN archives for the keyword *online*, the majority of articles and editor comments did not specifically address OWT or simply mentioned the word *online* in passing. We found similar trends in *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal* and *The Writing Center Journal (WCJ)*, with *Praxis* publishing five articles with the word *online* in the title since 2003, and *WCJ* publishing 17 since 2005.

Despite the lack of OWT-specific information in writing center-specific manuals and journals, work in OWI more broadly does exist, and this scholarship could be used as a foundation for OWT-specific conversations and resources. As early as 2004, Beth Hewett and Christa Ehmann created *Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction*, a comprehensive guide for those engaged in OWI. In 2010, Hewett's *The Online Writing Conference: A Guide for Teachers and Tutors* (revised and republished in 2015) focused specifically on effectively conducting online writing conferences. In March 2013, CCC's Committee for Effective Practices in OWI penned *A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI)*. Later, in 2015, Diane Martinez and Leslie Olsen expanded the CCC's guidelines, addressing accessibility and inclusivity for students along with practices for choosing and training online writing tutors (183-210), and Hewett published *Reading to Learn and Writing to Teach: Literacy Strategies for Online Writing Instruction*, detailing standards and ideal critical reading and writing skills for online instructors and students.

While these sources provide guiding principles for effective general OWI, OWT-specific principles are either absent from the literature or conflated with OWI principles. OWI principles, created for teaching online courses, do not address tutoring as pedagogically distinct from classroom teaching. However, Muriel Harris states on IWCA's website that tutoring and teaching are fundamentally different—"Tutors are coaches and collaborators, not teachers." This absence of OWT-specific pedagogy seems to leave tutors engaging in OWT with muddled guidance about student-tutor conferences. With few consistent discussions within IWCA concerning OWT, no current or planned IWCA position statements that explicitly address the work of online writing centers (Grogan⁵), and an IWCA bibliography on OWT that, during the year we worked on this article, includes only four sources—all published before 2001 ("IWCA Bibliography"), OWT professionals are left with important questions: Despite the conflation of teacher and tutor, do we align our practice with the CCC's Committee for Practices in OWI, which has embraced OWT research as exhibited in OWI Principles 13 and 14? Or, do we integrate OWT concepts with IWCA's traditional writing-center-as-separate-from-classroom position, building on previous writing center scholarship to define OWT as distinct from writing instruction that occurs in online classrooms?

Our call to action aligns with the latter. Over a quarter of postsecondary students are engaging in distance education (Online Learning Consortium). Correspondingly, we suggest that scholars and publishers focus a more representative portion of their conference presentations, writing center-specific journal articles, and tutoring manuals on serving this student population. Instead of categorizing OWT under the catch-all term of OWI or conflating it with WAC or other topics, those engaged in OWT currently have the important, timely opportunity to develop their own necessarily unique pedagogy, theory, and practice.

ROADMAP FOR OWT'S FUTURE

To date, the lack of sustained engagement with OWT research has led OWT professionals to create online resources and best practices in a vacuum (Hewett, "Grounding," 34). Others, as Stephen Neaderhiser and Joanna Wolfe note, eschew online teaching technologies because they lack funding, are "unaware of the tools available for online consultation, or just assume these technologies are out of their reach" (69). To reengage and support centers conducting or considering OWT, a necessary first step is to build a community to address current challenges of funding, training, and technology.

To develop OWT scholarship, conversations, and guiding practices, we propose creating a virtual association—a group that works to accomplish shared goals, develop professional relationships based on shared contexts, and build professional development opportunities (Hewett and Ehmann 20-21). In 2013, CCCC affirmed fostering such associations as an important practice for online tutors and administrators, calling for access to virtual associations for “support and professional development” (Effective Practice 14.13). We began forming this association by creating the OWT listserv to discuss OWT-specific needs. However, more must be done to ensure the traditional writing center ethos is broadened to include OWT principles. Specifically, we invite OWT staff to join GSOLE’s IWCA affiliate, which is the current online writing center affiliate (Grogan), to participate in conversations about online-specific issues, effective practices, and resources, and to present at regional and national IWCA conferences so that virtual contexts become central to writing center conversations. Because the new affiliate was created only recently, in October 2016, positions around OWT support, theory, and practice remain largely undecided (Denora) and, therefore, are still open to development based on OWT’s unique needs.

IWCA GSOLE affiliate members could encourage our association to craft a position statement explicitly addressing unique OWT methods—tutoring methods that are necessarily different from some foundational practices informing on-site tutoring (Hewett, *Online Writing* 106-107)—and to work with OWT staff to update IWCA website resources about working with students online. Further, we could work with IWCA to create research grants for OWT scholarship, build awards for OWT innovations, and designate travel grants for OWT staff. Such IWCA-driven guidance and encouragement for OWT staff would highlight the importance of OWT and provide a common theoretical origin from which to build future discussions and resources.

We believe OWT professionals should unite to educate IWCA regarding these vital needs and to support IWCA in implementing this important work. Such education has never been timelier, as IWCA’s president recently indicated that the board does not perceive developing explicit online writing center support to be a pressing need in 2017 (Grogan⁵). Developing more equitable resources for writing center staff working online to serve the millions of students pursuing distance-based education should be an immediate IWCA priority. To this end, we invite OWT staff to help develop the collective virtual association, conversations, and

scholarship that will shift online and hybrid students' needs from the margins to the center of writing center discourse.

NOTES

1. The authors and *WLN* editors thank Beth Hewett for her invaluable advice with this article.
2. IWCA's 2017 website update removed the definition of OWLs we use here.
3. The Online Writing Tutor Network is the working affiliate group within IWCA. To get involved, see <www.glosole.org/online-tutoring.html>.
4. Because the WCRP survey uses the phrase "online/virtual services" and does not ask whether respondents offer online consultations, we cannot determine whether this figure refers to online consultations, website resources, or both. Other WCRP questions, however, focus on aspects of online consultations, so respondents likely interpreted "online/virtual services" as meaning "online/virtual consultations."
5. At the time we interviewed Shareen Grogan, she was serving in her final year of a two-year term as the IWCA president.



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