Social Media and the Writing Center: Five Considerations

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Sporadic discussions of writing center social media use began with Rebecca Jackson and Jackie Grutsch McKinney's 2009 survey of writing center labor beyond tutoring sessions. Their findings, published in 2012, showed that 52 of the 141 writing centers they studied were using digital networking (8). Grutsch McKinney extended the conversation in her 2010 *WLN* column "Geek in the Center: Twitter" and her 2011 book chapter "Making Friends with Web 2.0: The Writing Center and Social Media Sites," which focuses on Facebook. More recently, Julia Bleakney, Michelle Hagar, and Maria Judnick explored blogs, another platform of social media, in their *Kairos* article "The Writing Center Blogs Project." Additionally, several blog posts by writing center practitioners have discussed writing center social media usage (Fandel; Jacobs; Marciniak; May; Shapiro).

However, most of the existing research and discussions, published between 2010 and 2013, are dated and tend to focus on a single platform. In their 2021 article, Bleakney et al., for example, analyze 43 writing center blogs to identify exemplary features and create tips for establishing one. In contrast, conversation in informal venues—particularly writing center blog posts discussing social media—sometimes consider multiple platforms (Fandel; Jacobs; May) rather than single ones (Shapiro; Marciniak). These posts add valuable knowledge from those directly involved with producing social media content for writing centers.

To bring practitioner knowledge into formal scholarship, I use interview data collected as part of a larger IRB-approved study to explore five considerations for writing center social media usage: purpose, time and labor, sustainability and expertise, broadcast approaches, and multimodal content. These considerations provide a way forward for writing centers to get—or stay—in these online spaces. As well, they reflect the robustness of social media's contemporary landscape by using more recent data and considering non-usage alongside usage of a single platform (Facebook) and multiple platforms (Facebook and Instagram; Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter[1]). Herein, I limit my consideration to Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter because they were the three most common platforms used by participants in the larger project.[2]

All five interviews, conducted between October 2019 and January 2020, included administrators. The three interviews at writing centers using social media also included a social media content creator employed by the center.

TABLE 1: INTERVIEW SITES

Site (Location and Type)	Public/Private Status and Population	Social Media Accounts	Interviewees
West Catholic University Writing Center	Private, religiously affiliated, under 4,000 undergraduate students.	None	Brenna (director)
Midwest Community College Writing Center	Public, over 22,000 students, offers primarily 2-year degrees.	None	Gladys (director)
Midwest University Writing Center	Public, around 15,000 students, multiple writing center locations.	Facebook	Liam (director) and Glenn (content creator)
Southeast University Writing Center	Public, 30,000 total students, 7,000 graduate students.	Facebook and Instagram	Erin (assistant director) and Shana (content creator)
Northeast Comprehensive University	Public, Hispanic-Serving Institution, 8,000 total students, 2,000 graduate students.	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter	David (director) and Laurie (content creator)

My selection of sites aimed to represent writing centers serving diverse institutional contexts in terms of location and type, public/private status, and population. These writing centers also used different numbers and combinations of platforms. Despite these differences, the considerations I mention in each of the following sections were common themes.

PURPOSE

The three directors at writing centers using social media had varying but clear and evolving purposes, three of which were common. Two of the three writing centers used social media to share operational information, a common theme in the 25 writing center tweets Grutsch McKinney analyzed in 2010 ("Geek in the Center" 7). Two writing centers also cited community-building as a purpose, whether they used social media to participate in broader campus conversations, create community between consultants, or promote other campus services using mentions. Additionally, two centers used social media to create a clearer image of their writing center; Midwest University Writing Center used Facebook to shape expectations and create a writing center ethos, whereas Southeast University Writing Center used their Instagram and Facebook to build culture. These purposes were not static, either. Southeast University Writing Center formerly posted writing tips on Wednesdays but implemented an anti-racist pedagogy series of posts responding to campus initiatives. Midwest University Writing Center also had a future purpose inspired by Miami University of Ohio's Howe Center: posting WAC content.

Purpose also mattered to the two writing centers who discontinued social media usage, either because it did not fulfill their purposes or these centers could fulfill purposes through other means. After four to seven years, West Catholic University Writing Center discontinued social media because, as the director Brenna notes, "we just weren't getting that much engagement," likely referring to the likes, shares, and comments on social media posts themselves. Likewise, Midwest Community College Writing Center

had abundant alternatives for promotion and outreach, including 1) an annual publication of tutors' written work; 2) a visit of each English class to the physical writing center space, and 3) a series of PowerPoint slides about writing displayed within the center.

TIME AND LABOR

Even with a clear purpose, writing centers face obstacles for maintaining their social media presence. In their blog posts, Mike Shapiro and Mark Jacobs both mention that social media is an investment of time, and four of the five interviewees mentioned time and labor as constraints. Southeast University Writing Center and Northeast Comprehensive University Writing Center both cross-posted information on their multiple accounts using TweetDeck, also mentioned by Shapiro, which could help centers save time. Both centers in this study that discontinued social media cited issues of time and labor as reasons why, either due to small staff size or an abundance of appointments and plentiful forms of other work.

SUSTAINABILITY AND EXPERTISE

Another issue with social media Grutsch McKinney raises in "Geek in the Center," and one that connects to time and labor, is sustainability. Her analysis of 25 writing center accounts revealed that just under half hadn't posted in four months (9), and in Bleakney et al.'s study of writing center blogs, about one-fifth were inactive. Alongside the aforementioned issues of labor and time, and considering the discontinuation of social media present in this study, this abundance of inactivity underscores issues of sustainability in writing center social media use.

The five writing centers in this study additionally highlighted a connection between sustainability and another factor: expertise. The three writing centers using social media were staffed by individuals who had an interest in—or practitioner's knowledge of—social media. Erin, the administrator at Southeast University Writing Center, noted she often checked a business's online presence before visiting, a practice she believed some writers may apply to the writing center. Similarly, the three writing centers using social media developed and implemented strategies to continue their center's social media presence after content creators leave the center. Often, writing center administrators and social media content creators within the center developed these strategies collaboratively, and three seem particularly useful to writing centers starting or maintaining social media accounts. First, Southeast University Writing Center planned handoffs of social media access to tutors interested in creating and posting content on behalf of the writing center. Second, Midwest University Writing Center established a team of graduate students to create social media content under the director's guidance, a strategy Shapiro mentions in his blog post. Third and finally, Southeast University Writing Center developed a thrice-weekly posting schedule that regularly featured tutors working in the space, connected to campus initiatives addressing racism, and provided motivating quotes.

The two writing centers that discontinued social media, on the other hand, did so in part because of sustainability issues related to time, labor, and expertise. West Catholic University Writing Center's tutor with video editing experience graduated, and no one else in the center possessed the expertise necessary to create video content. Similarly,

at Midwest Community College Writing Center, Gladys's own lack of social media expertise, both within and outside of her professional life, meant she was unsure how social media could benefit her writing center.

BROADCAST APPROACHES

One of Grutsch McKinney's major concerns about social media from "Geek in the Center" is the practice of acting as information providers, which seems antithetical to the conversational approaches often championed in writing center work in its one-way broadcast approach. Dismayed by the prevalence of writing centers she perceived as information providers and troubled by her own writing center's tendency to act as such on Twitter, she calls the practice "un-writing center-like" (9) and closes with a question of how her own center could be more engaging in such spaces (9). While this concern is not unfounded—after all, collaboration and conversation are the cornerstones of writing center work—the interviewees from writing centers using social media in this study seemed less concerned. In many cases, the information they shared connected to their purposes. Both Northeast Comprehensive University Writing Center and Midwest University Writing Center provided operational information and promoted writing center services, a practice very much in line with the tweets Grutsch McKinney analyzed over a decade ago.

However, for these centers, providing information went beyond operational information. In addition to writing center services, Northeast Comprehensive University Writing Center also posted about other departments' services, which connected to their purpose of building community. They used Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to circulate changes in campus operations arising from inclement weather and events offered by other departments. To signal their community-building purpose, they used institutional, campus, and community hashtags.

Thus, while writing centers use social media to share information, the three considered in this study did so purposefully. While at first glance the practice of providing information may seem antithetical to writing center philosophies, the lack of concern among interviewees suggests that, for these centers, the approach fits the context of social media and provides ways to engage with their campuses at large. The digital context of social media differs from an onsite or online writing center session, so broadcast can be an effective approach.

MULTIMODAL CONTENT

Notably, social media posts can include more than text. Several practitioner blog posts highlight or discuss visual content; Jennifer Fandel emphasizes the importance of visual content in her 2018 blog post, "Conversation Starter: Social Media and the Writing Center," and examples in Marciniak's, Shapiro's, and my blog posts all highlight how visual content can be used by writing centers. Marciniak focuses on memes, Shapiro's examples showcase photos, and I describe the challenges of creating images for my former center's accounts during the pandemic.

All three writing centers using social media included images in their content, albeit in different ways. Midwest University Writing Center used photographs of a whiteboard outside of the center and memes, combining the images Marciniak and Shapiro

described in their blog posts, as one way to portray the conversational, informal atmosphere their center offered. Southeast University Writing Center also mentioned photographs, but of campus buildings related to the issue of racism on campus. Southeast University Writing Center and Northeast Comprehensive University Writing Center also mentioned Canva, an online drag and drop graphic design program. Specifically, Southeast University Writing Center utilized still images because they were faster to produce and consume than video content, connecting back to the issue of time.

CONCLUSION

The five social media considerations emerging from these interviews—purpose, labor and time, sustainability and expertise, broadcast approaches, and multimodal content—provide writing centers with some strategies to develop and maintain a social media presence. Writing centers can benefit from thinking strategically about these five considerations whether they are already online and looking to maintain or expand, are new to social media and ready to start, or have discontinued use and are considering trying again.

Although I discuss each consideration above separately, these five interviews also suggest clear connections between them. Some decisions to share information—and what mode to share it in—were driven by purpose as much as they were by attention to time. Some strategies that considered writing centers' limited time and labor, including social media teams composed of multiple tutors, weekly posting schedules, and online tools like TweetDeck and Canva, helped make social media presence more manageable for writing centers with limited resources. Static images, as Southeast University Writing Center's content creator pointed out, are fast to create and consume and are thus more sustainable.

While these interviews highlight concepts for writing centers to think about, they also have two limitations. The first is that despite my best efforts, I was unable to recruit any participants from liberal arts schools for interviews and thus opted to include a second research institution using different platforms and representing a different region.

Second, this data was collected in late 2019 and early 2020, before the COVID pandemic changed so many aspects of writing center work. Though I raise this question in my blog post for *Another Word*, it bears asking again: what new issues did the pandemic create for writing center social media presence? Additionally, how did it undermine sustainability and change the way writing centers approach platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter? These questions, while likely not the only ones worth considering, provide additional ways forward as social media, the writers and institutions we support, and the world itself continue to change.

NOTES

1. Editors' Note:In the period between the article's acceptance and its publication, the Twitter platform was renamed to X.
2. See my "On Networking the Writing Center: Social Media Usage and Non-Usage," *Writing Center Journal*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2022.

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