

Writing Centers as a Bridge Between Silos: Interdisciplinary Conversations on AI and Writing

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Even on small campuses, faculty, staff, and students may experience academic silos that compartmentalize our work and discourage interdisciplinary collaboration. Such was the case in Fall 2022 with the launch of the free version of ChatGPT. At our institution, we each experienced the sudden prevalence of generative AI (GenAI) a bit differently. Some of us were already researching artificial intelligence; others were startled by that first AI-generated draft in our grading queue. Some of us joined larger conversations through the Wcenter Listserv, while others exchanged emails with peers across campus. We quickly realized some faculty and students were largely unaware of relevant conversations and resources on AI and writing, and even colleagues who were well-informed were interested in larger campus conversations. In the spirit of “From Silos to Synergies” (Holly-Wells et al.) and *Weaving Knowledge Together: Writing Centers and Collaboration* (Haviland, et al.), our team, which included faculty, staff, and a student tutor, decided to offer a collaborative panel discussion facilitated by the writing center to begin the larger campus conversation about GenAI. In this essay, we share the process and ideas that shaped this panel as an example of collaborative writing center programming aimed at breaking down silos and promoting deeper understanding of GenAI and writing.

Our professional societies have increasingly emphasized the importance of fostering critical AI literacy, which the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force defines as understanding “not just how AI models work but also about the risk, rewards, capacities, and complications of AI tools” (Byrd et al. 11). The Task Force, in its first working paper, recommends that institutions prioritize critical AI literacy for faculty and administrators (11). In its second paper, the Task Force focuses on policies promoting AI literacy. The third paper emphasizes fostering a culture of AI literacy on campuses, especially for GenAI, which is defined by Kim Martineau as “deep-learning models that can generate high-quality text, images, and other content based on the data they were trained on.” These position papers show the trajectory of one set of conversations in writing studies with increasing integration of AI literacy into various dimensions of writing programs, including writing centers.

With the growing emphasis on conversations between faculty, administrators, and students regarding AI literacy, the writing center’s opportunity to facilitate related interdisciplinary



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conversations has only become more vital. The speed of AI innovation and time constraints in the classroom and in publication may limit how teaching and research can respond to writing-related AI developments in real time. Further, while teaching and learning centers frequently focus on faculty professional development, multisubject student tutoring centers may not have the same expertise in the writing process as writing centers. Each of these stakeholders has an important voice in the campus conversation about GenAI; however, writing centers, campus hubs for interactions between students, faculty, and staff with deep expertise in writing and writing processes, can foster truly interdisciplinary conversations on technological developments and how they impact campus writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing centers may serve as bridges on their campuses. Jennifer Albanese and Christine Fena invoke a bridge metaphor when considering collaborations between the library and the writing center, arguing that “breaking down barriers and providing easily traversable bridges between research and writing support is paramount in helping students engage in effective and meaningful research and writing processes” (18). The writing center boasts a history of engaging students and faculty across campus to conceptualize writing and the writing process within the larger campus culture. For instance, Mark Waldo argues for writing centers as “the compositional heart of the institution,” highlighting the center’s leadership roles in both supporting student writers across the writing process and consulting with writing instructors (78). More recently, Erica Cirillo-McCarthy et al. offer other types of writing insight and campus leadership, helping to highlight deficit discourse related to multilingual student writing. They argue, “Not only do writing centers have a responsibility to examine how institutional practices impact their local contexts, they must also remain reflective in their framing of these narratives as they engage with their campus” (70). The writing center’s unique positioning in relationship to the whole student body and to instructors allows them to advocate for their students and for a commitment to writing process, and it likewise situates writing centers as effective leaders for facilitating interdisciplinary campus conversation on the relationship between AI and writing processes.

Writing centers have responded in a variety of ways to GenAI, with the 2024 IWCA conference highlighting “Technology-Enhanced Writing.” Some writing centers provide campus guidance on GenAI. For instance, the University of Alabama’s writing center emphasizes the value of the writing process in promoting student engagement even in the AI era; they also note that ChatGPT sometimes generates false citations (Dayton and Buck). To add further caution for those considering GenAI for idea generation and drafting, Hao-Ping Lee et al. show that “higher confidence in GenAI is associated with less critical thinking, while higher self-confidence is associated with more critical thinking” (1). Dani Lester, at Utah Valley University’s writing center, thus encourages students to “ditch GenAI’s analysis,” prioritizing their own views.

While there are concerns around incorporating GenAI into the writing process, students must develop critical digital literacy to evaluate whether, when, and how to use (or not use) GenAI in their writing (Anderson). Best practices related to AI and the writing process, based on replicable, aggregable, data-supported (RAD) research, are actively being established. For instance, the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force provides recommendations (Byrd et al.), like those previously mentioned.

Writing centers may foster and extend these same conversations on their campuses, drawing from and contributing to research on best practices. The conversation continues as writers explore new GenAI technologies and as insights on GenAI’s human impacts emerge (Lee et al.). As strong collaborators (Albanese and Fena) and advocates for student writers (Cirillo-McCarthy

et al.), writing centers can facilitate responsive and proactive campus conversations about GenAI literacy and writing.

SCHOOL CONTEXT

Valparaiso University is a comprehensive university of 3,000 students with a mostly domestic undergraduate population and a mostly international graduate population. At the center of campus is the library, which houses several academic support services, including the writing center.

The Judith L. Beumer Writing Center has a rich history of student-centered programming and cross-campus collaboration. Our center focuses on peer-to-peer tutoring; however, we also offer programs like our recent “What Does My Professor Want in this Paper?” that involve collaboration with faculty from across campus. In addition, the writing center uses WOnline to communicate with students, faculty, and staff about opportunities; thus, the writing center is well-positioned to foster conversations across departments and to reach diverse student populations across campus.

Prior to the writing center’s AI and writing panel, campus conversations around GenAI had been limited. The most notable discussion was a small faculty learning community on AI offered through our teaching and learning center, meeting biweekly for part of spring 2023. The small faculty group did not include students, further reinforcing academic silos in a time when the community needed to come together.

PROGRAM FORMAT: A WRITING CENTER PANEL DISCUSSION

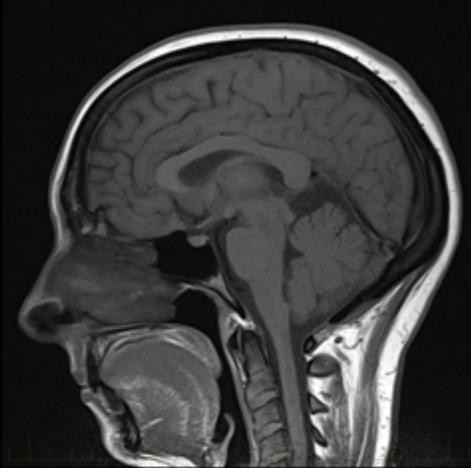
In March 2023, our writing center offered a panel discussion with a question-and-answer session. The panel idea originated from a conversation between the then writing center director and the university’s former writing center director, who is also English faculty. Both colleagues had attended a 2023 CCCC panel on GenAI together and decided to bring the conversation to campus. Our panel, moderated by the director, included two computer science professors, one English professor, one library science professor, one student writing center consultant from the physician assistant program, and the writing center director. We selected this group of colleagues to represent student, faculty, and staff voices and the interdisciplinary nature of AI literacy for writing.

We became an informal bridge across our departments and between faculty and students as colleagues in our respective circles inquired about our work, anticipating our event with questions about technology, assignments, and ethics. The associate provost, who was following our conversation, helped us to consider meeting spaces. Our deans and friends asked us about our plans, also highlighting the event’s exigency.

Our team planned the logistics for the event and developed slides and a flyer (fig. 1). The writing center promoted the panel through WOnline, the first-year writing program, a faculty and staff email, and the flyer. We decided on the title “‘I Will Stand on. . . Your Brain’: ChatGPT’s Possible Impact on Writing and Thought,” referencing media theorist Marshall McLuhan, whom we cited in the panel. McLuhan invokes Archimedes: “Give me a place to stand and I will move the world,” and suggests that media “stand on your eyes, your ears, your nerves, and your brain,” thus moving the world (68). Our goal was to provoke thought about the impact of GenAI on writers. We designed the event for a general audience and debated about its length, deciding on an hour so as not to dissuade audience members. We hosted the event in the student center with in-person and Zoom options; the writing center director offered a welcome, followed by brief presentations,

and then a question-and-answer session. The panel introduced ChatGPT, its impacts on writing, and then questions about AI literacy. Just as our disciplinary expertise varied, so did our experiences and views of GenAI.

**"I Will Stand on...Your Brain":
ChatGPT's Possible Impact on Writing and Thought**



Thursday, March 30
7:00-8:00 p.m.
Location redacted

Source: <https://www.melbournradbiology.com.au/diagnostic-image/r1-ica-b-1041/>

In recent news coverage, reporters suggest that ChatGPT and related technologies may revolutionize writing (and writing instruction) – for good or for ill. This panel-style writing center presentation and discussion, featuring faculty, staff, and student speakers, will introduce the technology behind ChatGPT and the ways that ChatGPT may inform the writing process. We will also explore information literacy and ethical questions about authorship and freedom of thought as they relate to the use of ChatGPT. Q&A to follow.

Panelists:
Name redacted (Assistant Professor of Computing and Information Sciences)
Name redacted (Associate Professor of English)
Name redacted (Writing Center Director)
Name redacted (Associate Professor of Library Science)
Name redacted (Associate Professor of Computing and Information Sciences)
Name redacted (Writing Center Consultant)
Name redacted (Writing Center Consultant)

Fig. 1. Flyer for the writing panel

PANEL PRESENTATION HIGHLIGHTS

First, computer science faculty provided an overview of ChatGPT's underlying technology. The panelists defined GenAI and GPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformer). Then they explored the transformer architecture, the primary components of ChatGPT, and other relevant technologies. Additionally, they explained the data sources used to train GPT3. This segment aimed to help the audience understand how ChatGPT works internally, as well as the limitations of these models and where they can be used effectively.

Then, the writing center's portion of the panel focused on the writing process. Center staff shared how the process of discussing, drafting, and brainstorming ideas contributes to the creativity and voice of a writer while facilitating collaboration in a writing center session. They also highlighted the writing center's mission of creating better writers, not just better writing (North). In the panel, the student consultant suggested that we must be careful so that ChatGPT does not take away the ability to become a better writer by diminishing student creativity and personal experience.

In research postdating the panel, Alan Knowles explores this risk, introducing human-in-the-loop writing, “a baseline ethical AI collaborative writing workflow” (1), where the writer relinquishes much of their agency to the machine. In contrast, he presents machine-in-the-loop writing, where the writer retains more control while integrating GenAI into their writing process. Introducing these concepts in future workshops could give students and consultants a framework for thinking about GenAI and writer agency. While acknowledging the risk of diminished agency, in this first panel, the writing center consultant offered one of the more favorable assessments of the technology, discussing their perception of the potential benefits of ChatGPT, such as using it as a starting place for ideas. This segment aimed to help the audience consider how GenAI may impact the writing process.

Next, an English faculty panelist discussed ethical questions related to authorship and technology, drawing from McLuhan’s argument that technology is not neutral. To help the audience explore this claim, the panelist asked everyone to consider the impact of the Internet or smartphones in their lives, encouraging the audience to ponder how writing with AI might change their writing process, their written product, or their perspectives (when AI-generated responses do not reflect the writer’s own original ideas). The goal of this discussion was to introduce the concept of critical AI literacy.

Finally, the library’s portion of the panel focused on ChatGPT’s implications in research writing. Prior to the panel, the librarian tested ChatGPT 3.5 with three prompts, and at the panel they shared results. For each prompt, the librarian had asked ChatGPT to generate a new response approximately twenty times. During the panel, the librarian shared the first and final responses, including prompts from our school’s Literature, Media, and Theology introductory assignments and related ChatGPT prompts. The goal was to see if the output improved based on the librarian’s feedback. The librarian shared outputs with text that appeared to be essays with citations, but with one of ChatGPT’s most significant problems: source hallucination (“Artificial Intelligence”). Namely, all citations generated were problematic or nonexistent. While titles appeared plausible and names of journals or scholars might be correct for the scholarly field, at the time, ChatGPT returned citations for nonexistent articles with real author names in real journals.¹ Citations that did exist included significant mistakes. In addition, the librarian shared how repeated requests for in-text citations in the follow-up prompts failed to generate them. The librarian ended their portion of the panel by emphasizing that not all academic information was included in ChatGPT, adding to concerns about bias and exclusion. The goal was to help the audience evaluate GenAI in the context of research writing.

EVENT PARTICIPATION: A FIRST STEP TOWARD BREAKING DOWN SILOS

Around 50 in-person and 25 online participants joined this event: a combination of faculty, students, and administrators. Audience members included faculty from English, computer science, and other departments; some first-year students attended for optional lab credit, as did students interested in AI. A representative from the provost’s office also joined the conversation.

Throughout the panel, questions were submitted anonymously through a QR code. Some questions addressed strategies for AI use, such as, “Is ChatGPT good for writing research papers?” Other questions related to ethics: “What do you think is the ethicality of using LLMs to help find evidence or refine discussion?” Obviously, we could not address all questions in detail in the hour, but these questions gave us ideas for future discussions.

The goal was to provide a first opportunity for faculty, students, and staff to have an interdisciplinary conversation together about GenAI and its implications. As important as it was

to provide a timely event for our campus community, this collaborative opportunity was also valuable to us as panelists. In planning this event and writing this paper, we had to wrestle with each other's different perspectives, training, and experiences. In other words, the process of assembling the panel and event planning was also an act of breaking down silos; and our efforts continue. Panelists from the writing center event subsequently helped to facilitate the full-campus spring faculty workshop and later workshops related to GenAI. Instead of campus bans, these conversations help promote best practices regarding GenAI assistance.

CONCLUSION

As a bridge between silos, writing centers may help students, faculty, and staff in their own institutions and beyond to explore both the potential and limitations of GenAI in writing. This article provides one example of a cross-campus collaboration led by a writing center with the library and other academic departments, illustrating the importance of interweaving insights on writing process, information literacy, critical AI literacy, computer science, and other fields. Collaboration is essential as insights from all these fields are vital to foster a culture of GenAI literacy. Computer scientists help us understand GenAI and its evolution. Library scientists situate the conversation in larger discussions of information literacy. Rhetoric and composition scholars also provide theoretical grounds for the discussion. As research on GenAI's impacts on human creativity is published, social scientists also contribute important insights. Writing centers support writers across campus, sharing the privilege and responsibility of engaging students in conversations about GenAI.

These conversations happen informally during consultations, and we can proactively provide consultants, writers, and the campus community with opportunities to learn more about GenAI and writing with insights across disciplines. These groups are not always in conversation with one another; however, writing centers, with their deep connections to students, faculty, and staff across campus, can facilitate these collaborations. For this program, we leveraged our student-centered approach, our collaborative ethos, and knowledge of the writing process. We look forward to future interdisciplinary writing center conversations, helping to foster critical AI literacy for writing – even and perhaps especially as technologies of writing continue to evolve and change.

NOTE

1. ChatGPT now more reliably provides accurate citations when prompted, highlighting the speed with which the technology evolves.

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