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Wiring The Writing Center

Eric Hobson

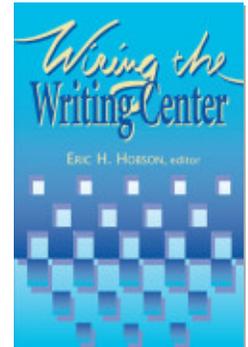
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*Straddling the Virtual Fence*¹

Eric H. Hobson

THE MERGING OF COMPUTERS AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY HAS created a new educational frontier, albeit a virtual one. Faced with seemingly endless possibilities for incorporating computers and electronic communication technology into the classroom and other learning environments, many literacy educators are attempting to stake their claim to some of the territory up for grabs on the internet, World Wide Web (WWW), and other emerging and yet-to-be-realized electronic environments. In a scenario akin to the land rushes of the nineteenth century, educators have climbed on to whatever available mode of conveyance (PC, Mac, UNIX, etc.) and have attempted to keep up with the hoard of other users who, metaphorically, are heading west into this virtual landscape. Yet, like their historical predecessors, many educators moving online do so with little chance of achieving their idealized visions of success and limitless bounty for their students and themselves: they use obsolete or inadequate technology; have little-to-no guidance; aren't prepared to deal with hostile neighbors and other predators; haven't planned beyond the initial trip.

As with most new developments, approval for the universal use of computer technology in the teaching of writing has not been unanimous. Many educators, particularly those in the humanities, distrust claims made to support a mass adoption of computer assisted instruction. Most teachers of writing respond to the presence of technology and teaching in one of four ways: rail against its dehumanizing potential; ignore it and hope that it won't affect them too much; explore its uses and implications tentatively; a small percentage embrace it enthusiastically. Regardless of our individual reactions to the presence of computer and electronically mediated technology in the writing center, one must acknowledge, as does Diana George (1995, 333), that

the technology is here. We cannot ignore it. Furthermore, we already know that computer technology—the communication revolution—is more powerful than skills-and-drills workbooks on a screen. What we don't quite yet know, I am convinced, is how this 'New World' really will reconfigure our teaching and our tutoring.

Among writing teachers, writing center personnel often have been at the vanguard of the move to online instructional applications, developing a range of

variations on tutorial and consulting services that translate to the unique conditions of electronic/computer-mediated communication. As Murphy, Law, and Sherwood's *Writing Centers: An Annotated Bibliography* (1996), and Sherwood's update of that information for this project (chapter fourteen) demonstrates, discussions of educational technology's role, particularly of computers and computer mediated communications, in working with writers in the writing center setting has been an on-going and, at times, contentious topic in the composition studies and the writing center communities. The writing center community's discussion of this issue is recorded most consistently within the pages of *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, and more recently in the archives for the email discussion group, Wcenter. This process of program development and critical assessment has been highlighted most prominently in special issues of *The Writing Center Journal* 8.1 (1987) and *Computers and Composition* 12 (1995) which focused on the role(s) of computers within the writing center setting. Writing in the special issue of *Computers and Composition*, David Healy (1995 "From Place") raises the following questions about wired writing centers:

What is the ontological status of a virtual writing center, and what kind of relationship will clients develop with it? How will it be perceived by the rest of the academy? What possibilities and what threats are opened up by going online. (191)

"These are the kinds of questions," Healy continues, "that writing centers must confront in the age of information technology . . . Online writing centers represent a window of opportunity. Our challenge is to be reflective and self-critical while the opportunities before us are still flush." (191-92)

Taking its charge from Healy, this collection brings together seventeen writing center professionals from across American education—public and private; large and small; secondary, community college, four-year college, and university—to discuss the possibilities and limitations that online applications offer to writing centers. Specifically, these individuals present models and strategies for developing, modifying, and maintaining online services that meet two important criteria: they are pedagogically sound; they support the writing center's mission generally and within the context of specific/local educational environments. While advocating that writing center professionals make use of and take full advantage of the current and emerging potentials for online writing center applications, there is also the need for an equally critical and careful examination of what is to be gained and lost from moving in the direction of more wired writing center work. As all of the chapters make clear, the online activities that are currently underway in wired writing centers—Online Writing Centers (OWLs), WWW home pages, etc.—are essentially first-generation experiments, optimistic forays into the pedagogical unknown. Given the relative newness of these applications, however, we would be remiss to advocate that the community dive into this type of activity without an awareness of the dangers (real and imagined) and shortcomings that can and do

exist. The constant note in these chapters is this: explore these and other online applications with enthusiasm; however, never forget that the technology does not provide a writing center with anything that can replace the people who work there, who train the staff, and whose experience, intuition, and common sense underlies a very powerful form of guiding insight. As Dickie Selfe admonished the writing center community in his engagingly titled *Computers and Composition* article, “Surfing the Tsunami: Electronic Environments in the Writing Center,”

Voices of dissent from workers and students in writing centers are or should be an essential element of the planning process if computers and composition specialists and writing center workers want to mediate—at least locally—the massive and often blind “will to technologize” in this culture. (312)

And, as Bruce Pegg demonstrates in chapter thirteen, the increased numbers of writing centers that offer or are planning to offer online services suggests an abiding interest in the subject of computer mediated applications for the wired writing center. That interest often crashes against the harsh realities of these writing center professionals’ lives—often tenuous professional status; heavy teaching and administrative loads; heavy service expectations; etc.—in such a way as to make the immediate implementation of many of the online services described in the following pages improbable or of secondary importance to more pressing or more pragmatic issues. One common issue that limits the use of online writing center services is that most of the people currently directing writing centers and training the tutors who work in these centers usually have neither the time nor the expertise to explore all the available options and to create online tutorial services. Beyond this limitation, they often lack convenient or adequate access to the required technology and the computer skills needed to undertake the construction and maintenance of these services. Additionally, there are few print resources available on the topic of computer-mediated writing center activity. Articles appear in *The Writing Center Journal* and *Writing Lab Newsletter* on this topic, but rarely in a coordinated, connected manner. Ironically, the best articles and guides appear in electronic forums, such as *Kairos*, a medium still unavailable or unknown to the many writing center directors. This lack of access is especially acute for writing center directors and staff in community colleges and secondary schools where computers are neither always widely accessible nor internet access a given. Regardless of the allure of electronic media, paper documents such as this book remain a primary source for disseminating information among members of this academic community.

The wide-ranging, thoughtful, and innovative discussions presented in this collection’s chapters are richly detailed accounts of the contributing authors’ activities, plans, reflections, and critique as they explore the implementation and implications of online writing centers. Taken both individually and as a whole, these chapters significantly expand the breadth and the depth of the community’s conversations about technology’s role(s) in the writing center. They offer models

for others to modify to their local needs. These authors also step back to critique their endeavors in light of many issues: information about technology's impact on educational activity; the differing developmental needs of less and more mature writers; less-than-ideal realities about individual's and institution's access to technology; and established writing center theory and practice. As a set of foregrounding thoughts then, this chapter responds to and weaves in and out of the following chapters and the web of associations, assumptions, connotations, citations, implications, and innovations that each author brings to this project.

PAUSING TO ASK

It is not too far off the mark to say that an increasingly large percent of my professional time and self-definition is mediated and largely determined by the myriad available forms of electronic communication. I benefit directly as a writer, teacher, and member of the writing center community from my colleagues' (those whose work this book reflects directly and those it echoes) efforts to theorize, tinker with, implement, proselytize, and praise the potential applications emerging for electronically mediated forms of writing assistance and professional development based in the writing center. As these technologies expand, develop, and become easily accessible, I anticipate that this linking of personal/professional identity to technology will only continue. Yet, trained in the humanistic and post-enlightenment-bleeding-into-postmodern tradition of skepticism and critique, I tend to step back and ask probing questions—even about things and systems to which I am growing increasingly dependent and indebted.

I have little doubt that computers—and other electronic communication technologies presently available or currently in planning, testing, or initial distribution phases—will continue to play a pronounced role in the work that literacy educators undertake. Who determines what that role will be and the shape(s) it will take, however, is not a given. As Dickie Selfe states, the wave of change is coming—about that there is no doubt. Therefore, as teachers charged with helping students develop needed literacy abilities, we must start to determine how we will interact with this change. Between the alternative of standing defiantly in front of the tidal wave of technological change or of harnessing its momentum to the needs of writing centers and their clients, Selfe opts for the latter for himself and likewise recommends that choice to the writing center community. I concur. There is a real need for writing center personnel who theorize and implement online and other technological, writing center instructional services and learning environments to explore the implications of these actions, to stop and to check the community's sometimes unbridled enthusiasm.

Peter Carino's reference in chapter twelve to Neil Postman's critique of technology's shaping influence on culture is particularly apropos given this book's overall careful (re)assessment of computer-mediated communications technology in the writing center. In both Postman's work and in Carino's use of this material is the

warning that technology does not “pause to ask” about its impact on culture. This guardedness, shared by all of this book’s contributors, is an important critical stance—more so than a comfortable “proceed with caution” stance based on timidity—because it allows these authors the space they need to carefully, insightfully, and precisely assess the results of their actions to date. Keeping with this collection’s overriding agenda—pausing to ask—in setting the stage for the material that follows, I want to make a number of observations about the (sometimes ironic; always revealing) way in which the writing center community has wired itself.

Specifically, a number of issues that my contributing colleagues raise and/or reveal about technologically-rich writing center programs warrant careful scrutiny. As we grow increasingly aware, there are implications (positive and negative) to each decision that writing center personnel make about the role(s) that technology will/should play in their particular context. As such, the writing center community’s members must carefully (re)assess their desires to join the electronic/virtual wagon train, even as they continue their initial online forays. Critical reflection will help us all decide how and to what extent we will move the types of educational encounters and philosophies held dear by the writing center community at large into the admittedly unknown (a simultaneously terrifying and exciting situation) territory/ies inhabited and made possible by wired writing centers.

WHAT IS THE WRITING CENTER (COMMUNITY) TO (BE)COME?

My understanding of writing processes and literacy/ies is shaped in ways I do/do not easily recognize by my increasing reliance on the personal computer as my primary writing tool and on such electronic communication systems as email and the World Wide Web as both conduits for professional communication and collaboration and as mediums for classroom instruction. At the same time, my fundamental self-definition(s) as a writer and a writing teacher is most definitely *not* yet wedded inextricably to technology in terms of my thinking about, creating, and maintaining the interpersonal relationships found in traditional writing center instructional dyads—teacher/student, tutor/client, mentor/mentee—or in small-group, collaborative settings. This apparently paradoxical personal/professional reality is one that I think I share with writing center colleagues of my generation—first and second generation writing center practitioners.

Cynthia Selfe (1995) acknowledges “the complex knot of issues generated by technology use in writing centers” (309). While she pays attention to a wide range of issues, she focuses particular attention on the give-and-take reality that accompanies any new literacy technology (pencil, printing press, computer, MUD/MOO, etc.), what she describes as

the potential for increased communication, community building, information access, and literacy education that technology offers students and teachers, but also of the

many dangers that technology poses for the academic ecosystem of writing centers, humanities and English departments, and universities—the ways in which technology many affect coach-student relationships; the nature of the teaching and learning that goes on in these richly textured spaces; the goals and the missions of writing centers, and the status of these places within educational communities; the lives and outlooks of coaches, staff, and students who labor within writing centers. (309)

As Selfe tells us, in the midst of our enthusiasm for and implementation of the various ideas, applications, dreams, and desires that inhabit the concept of the wired writing center, there is a pressing need to stop and consider what are the results—immediate and potential—of our online forays. What are the potential reconfigurations of writing centers and of the writing center community that result from its rush to go online, to explore virtual configurations?

The collaborative dream realized?

Although it is too soon to gauge the longevity of these claims, there is no hiding from the fact that the literature about technology and writing—both for the discipline of composition studies and the writing center community—rests on the assumption that technology allows those teachers charged with improving students' writing abilities to do their jobs much more efficiently. Within the closer confines of the literature on online writing centers, including material presented here, there exists a palpable enthusiasm for online writing activity, an almost utopian vision of what the computer mediated writing environment can help us to achieve.

As it has to a large extent in composition circles, so too is it becoming commonplace to encounter many of the following types of claims about the benefits of computers in the writing center: computers in the tutorial setting allow for more equitable and convenient access to center resources and services (Gardner, chapter five; Kinkead 1988); computers and computer networks encourage collaboration among writers (Farrell 1987, 1989, Jordan-Henley and Maid 1995 "MOOving"); computers decenter authority and enhance tutor training (Chappell, Johaneck and Rickly); virtual tutoring represents the future (Coogan 1995, Crump, Jordan-Henley and Maid 1995 "Tutoring", 1995 "MOOving", Kinkead 1988). The consensus of these proponents of a tight integration of computer mediated tutoring activities is that the computer and writing activities facilitated by computer networks realize the social constructivist ideology and pedagogy advocated by the writing center community within the past decade. Particularly, computers can help to establish community among tutors and encourage collaboration among writers in ways that help to create writing environments and collaborative relationships that are more natural than the artificial ones found in the typical classroom (Crump, Chappell, Jordan-Henley and Maid 1995 "MOOving").

A technology defined caste-based community?

In the midst of our enthusiasm for emerging technological applications, and in the midst of our eagerness to tell everyone else about the uses to which we put

these applications, the writing center community must recognize the potential for it to unwittingly develop and enact a hierarchy—a class structure—based solely on the extent to which centers do/do not embrace or foreground technology in their day-to-day operations. Much of the community's strength and vitality results directly from its willing acceptance of its members' diverse missions and practices, a recognition of each writing center's situatedness as a primary agent in determining its priorities and procedures. To lose this tolerance to a yardstick based upon websites, online tutoring, and other technological applications would be devastating. Yet, despite our well-meaning assurances to the negative, the potential for doing so is real.

At each conference sponsored by the National Writing Centers Association, as well as at writing center sessions at NCTE and CCCC, the sessions about computer applications in the writing center fill to overflowing and generate tremendous amounts of highly animated and optimistic discussion. As much as I enjoy these sessions, I am bothered by the looks of consternation on many colleagues' faces, looks that suggest they feel somehow out of the loop, or less viable than their techophile colleagues. In our rush to show what we can do and have done with computers within the context of a particular writing center, it is easy to forget a number of very powerful realities:

- not every center has access to the many resources needed to replicate these efforts;
- not every center's clientele have access to the technology needed to make such projects expedient;
- not every center can determine its future and fate to the extent needed to follow suit;
- not every center's mission or philosophical foundation is commensurate with the assumptions contained in many online writing center projects.

To forget these fundamental differences while we celebrate the technologically innovative achievements of others, is to celebrate uncritically. The composite result of that type of spotlighting (and, simultaneously shunting aside) sends powerfully norming messages about what the community values, about what constitutes full community membership and recognition, and about what types of activity the community validates. This type of community definition, replete with ex/inclusions, is a reality to which we must pay careful attention as we explore technology's role in the writing center and as we continue to discuss the results and the implications of these activities.

A computer lab for writing?

As writing centers develop online resources that increasingly reflect, mimic, replicate, or provide prototypes for many of the online resources found in computer assisted composition classrooms (or, vice versa), and as writing centers encourage more writers to interact with other writers virtually rather than within

the close confines of the face-to-face (f2f) tutorial, at what point is the allocation of the current monetary and physical resources no longer easily justified? “What is the value added by the physical writing center?” might become a question that we are forced to respond to should our OWLs and other electronic services attract the focused attention of budget conscious administrators. The answers we supply must be ones we have thought through with care because they will be directed most often to administrators who understand the powerful sway that technology linked educational programs hold over the public through a deeply rooted cultural assumption that technology holds the answers to problems, particularly such vexing problems as found in literacy education. To reiterate Wallace’s point (chapter eleven), if the writing center begins to duplicate (even if only in appearance) the computerized composition classroom and its virtual resources for writers, including online materials and conferencing capabilities, what has the writing center become? What will be its fate? At what point in its expansion into online applications, asks Wallace, does a writing center cease to be a writing center and become a computerized writing classroom? While this is not a popular question, and certainly is not a question answered by this or by the following chapters, it is quite possibly the most important question facing the writing center community as it wrestles with the task of if and how it is possible to take the writing center online with its services and guiding philosophies and value systems intact.

An obsolete service?

I raise these questions neither to sound alarmist nor to draw a line in the sand and tell my colleagues that they cross it at their own peril. Issuing ultimatums and yelling “fire” are not effective rhetorical options because they ignore the many pressures that combine within the complicated calculus of most writing center practitioners’ program development and maintenance process. I know how hard it is to make time to step back from the pressing needs of the program and assess its present status and needs. In my day-to-day, frenetic existence as a teacher and writing center educator, for instance, it is quite easy for me to react to other writing center’s highly visible technology adaptations and to think, “I’d better get a webpage up and running that looks as good as Utopia U’s,” or, “I need to get online tutoring started.” What is more difficult, however, is to find/make the time needed to think ahead, to play out the possible scripts that represent my and my program’s potential futures as a result of these online enactments. When I make the time to do so, however, like Wallace, one possible future I see finds the writing center and my work within it rendered at worst obsolete and/or redundant, or fundamentally redefined. What I have yet to determine in these scenarios is whether that potential for obsolescence is due to evolution or replacement of the services and attitudes that have defined the writing center and its community. As Peter Carino remarked during the later stages of writing this book, “We could end up complicitous in our own obsolescence if we jump on the bandwagon without asking where it is headed.”

DO WIRED WRITING CENTERS SUPPORT
TECHNO-CURRENT TRADITIONAL RHETORIC?

As a quick review of the writing center community's literature over the past decade reveals, the community has expended a great deal of energy in the attempt to distance its existence, mission, and pedagogical practices from the "undesirable" taint of serving the conservative ideology imbedded in postivist approaches to writing (Ede, Hobson 1992, Lunsford 1991, Murphy 1991). This desire occupies the philosophical (although, probably not the political) heart of the "writing lab vs. writing center" debate that both Wallace and Carino allude to in their chapters. Writing center proponents found their rallying cries of "individualized instruction," "process," "collaborative learning," "peer feedback," "audience and community accommodation," in a frequently idiosyncratic mix of expressivist and social constructivist thought and practice (Hobson 1992, 1994, Carino 1995 "Theorizing"). The upshot of this concerted and deeply-felt activity was to link the term "writing lab" with pedagogy derided as bereft of validity: worksheets dedicated to grammar and mechanics; repetitive drill exercises for developing and demonstrating mastery of the language; and formulaic writing task which reflect conservative culture's value of form and convention over developing writers' critical thinking and communicative flexibility. In opposition to the label "writing lab," "writing center" has come to represent innovative, process-based and contextually-located pedagogy focusing on the student and her need to negotiate her position within many discourse communities (Wallace 1991).

While this overstated history travels well-covered ground, I do so to highlight the following, a situation I find distressing and entertainingly ironic: in their first forays online, many writing centers are creating themselves in the form of their antithesis, that nemesis writing lab. Put bluntly, many OWLs consist primarily of the contents of old filing cabinets and handbooks—worksheets, drill activities, guides to form—pulled out of the mothballs, dusted off, and digitized (see Pegg's review of WWW sites in chapter thirteen). In addition to a reliance on these types of materials, by allowing—even encouraging—writers to make use of these online resources, many of these writers write in isolation, simultaneously reinscribing tenets found in current traditional rhetoric's insistence on originality of ideas (collaboration is a form of cheating) and expressivist rhetoric's Romantic portrayal of the individual as the locus of a personal truth (Berlin, Hobson 1992). While I do not ascribe pernicious motives to my colleagues who have developed these sites—I firmly believe in their good intentions, as I hope they concede my good will and humor as I critique these sites—the explosion of filing-cabinet-like online information available at an increasingly large number of writing center websites, programs that espouse a commitment to seeing writing as complex social phenomenon in their tutoring and tutor training, raises several other points worth reflecting on.

WHAT CAN('T) AN OWL DO
 THAT A WRITING CENTER CAN('T)?

OWLs, as entities that exist within the physical and virtual space of a computer system offer writing centers highly efficient and expeditious means to store large amounts of information in incredibly small areas (a hard drive; a 3.5" disk). Stored in the semi-public domain of LANs, Gopher files, and webpages, this is information that writers can access on their own and at their convenience. With this bulk digitized and stored in personal computers and other computer configurations, physical space once devoted to filing cabinets full of print materials and other records can become available tutorial space; staff can also be relieved from the repetitious and tedious clerical task of digging out these materials.

The argument that an OWL offers increased access to many traditionally under served client populations is quite compelling. It makes sense that internet access, for instance, does make it possible for many of the less-frequently served client groups that Gardner mentions to use writing center materials and services at their convenience. Convenience is an important issue for students who commute, who juggle work/family/school obligations, whose access and mobility are hindered by physical disabilities, who are enrolled in distance education programs, who take courses at night or on weekend schedules, and, perhaps, who are exceedingly shy (Kinkead 1988). Does convenience, however, necessarily translate to a quality of service equal to that found in the physical writing center? The jury is still out on this issue. This question is both essential and complex.

Helping novice writers develop the ability and confidence needed to practice the demanding activities of critical thinking, audience analysis and accommodation, idea invention and development, implementation of conventions within specific discourse communities is a subtle task, a point that Childers, Jordan, and Upton foreground in their thoughts about secondary school writing centers (chapter nine). Michael Spooner (1994 "A Dialogue"), Jeffrey Baker (1994), and Katherine Grubbs (1994) each raise important questions about how effective online tutorials are for working with less-mature writers, particularly given the medium's lack of paralinguistic cues from which both the tutor and client glean continuous information about the conversation's movement and success. Can an OWL, in its most common current configuration as repository of forms and handouts, accomplish results that are in the writer's best interests and that are consistent with the philosophical and pedagogical principles the writing center community has fought dramatically to make the centerpiece of the community's practice and self-definition?

While I think it is possible to do so—Gardner's and Monroe's chapters present compelling examples to the positive—it isn't easy. And, ease is the overriding factor behind the fact that the majority of OWL resources look suspiciously like skill driven, current traditional "writing labs." Formatting static webpages isn't that demanding an activity, once one learns basic HTML commands; their upkeep,

however, can be incredibly time consuming, a process that a colleague recently referred to as “a sinkhole into which I seem to have cast all of my and my tutors’ spare time trying to develop, debug, and maintain.” If getting an OWL to the stage where most currently are is a demanding process, creating OWLs that are consistent with the best of the writing center community’s social constructivist-influenced theory and practice takes an incredible commitment of time, resources, energy, and continuing/continuous education on the part of everyone involved—planners, administrators, tutors, clients. Most writing center programs do not currently have the resources or the expertise to undertake this, more pedagogically defensible, version of the wired writing center. As Ellen Mohr demonstrates (chapter ten), time is a commodity in short supply, without the exponentially increasing demands created by the addition of sophisticated online services.

On a much more pragmatic level, I ask, why is it that we feel compelled to pull all this stuff out of the closet anyway? Didn’t we work very hard to relegate positivist-based pedagogy to the very margins of writing center activity (Carino 1995 “Theorizing”, Ede, Hobson 1992, 1994, Lunsford 1991, Murphy 1991)? If we think that writers can benefit from such electronic handouts and forms, why not let the textbook publishers take on the task—one it seems they already do well, based on the incessant flow of handbooks and workbooks on floppy disks and CD-ROMs flowing across my desk? Is the time it takes to develop (or to digitize) these materials worth the investment and the associated risk of appearing to condone their uncritical use. Frankly, we can tell writers, and other stakeholders who may have an investment (ideological, financial, dependency) in these types of materials, where they can be found—like the U. of Michigan OWL, we can always provide links to such websites—without having to create them ourselves, and in the process of doing so implicitly give our stamp of approval to them and to the pedagogy and ideology to which they adhere. Might we do so for reasons other than pedagogical, driven instead by politics, opportunities for expansion and self-aggrandizement?

WHERE SHOULD WE FOCUS OUR ENERGY?

As each chapter in this collection demonstrates, writing center professionals are being called upon to do more and more, often with the same or fewer resources and with increased expectations. In addition to their roles developing, implementing, and overseeing important support services for all writers within their community, they increasingly wear any number of hats: technology coordinator and chief computer fixer, email and web guru, faculty developer and curriculum coordinator. Nowhere is this situation made more clear than in Ellen Mohr’s detailed history of all of the computer related courses she has taken in the past few years and extent to which the presence of computers in her writing center has reconfigured both her time and her role in the center. She has moved from being continually engaged in tutoring and tutor training to having less time to be part of these central writing center activities. Now she spends a majority of her time working with

such computer related issues as learning and teaching software packages; ironically, however, her evaluation process still assumes that she is responsible for those tutorial related activities on which she once focused her activity.

In, “Computer Centers and Writing Centers: An Argument for Ballast,” an article that responds to the types of situations Mohr describes, Nancy Grimm points to the costs of trying to accomplish everything and to be everything to everyone when she writes that “writing center professionals need time to focus on issues unique to their location” (324) Using her situation as writing center director at Michigan Technological University as an illustrative example upon which to investigate the costs associated with developing the knowledge and skills base needed to plan and oversee expansion of the writing center into virtual space(s), she writes,

If I had to develop expertise in hardware and software, for example, I would not have been able to engage our staff in the program of critical reflection that is leading to some interesting literacy research; nor would I have had time to carry the idea of peer tutoring to other departments on our campus. (324)

As Ellen Mohr candidly states, “I quickly discovered that I had better things to do with my time.” As more writing center directors and their staffs push beyond the first phase of using online resources to advertise general information about the writing center and to make handouts available, Mohr’s sentiment may become quite common.

WHEN ARE SOME THINGS PATENTLY ABSURD?

I marvel at the ingenuity and commitment that writing center colleagues bring to their efforts to explore the potential uses to which they can put new technology to work in the writing center. Projects such as those described by Rickly (chapter three), Gardner (chapter five), Monroe (chapter one), and Kearcher (chapter six), for example, inevitably make me root for their success. At points, however, we need to acknowledge that, in spite of our best intentions, the results of some of our online efforts approach the sublimely ridiculous, particularly when students take the products of our idealized intentions and use them to achieve their decidedly idiosyncratic ends. My favorite example of this technologically-mediated irony comes from a colleague’s writing center, and is, I think, a story that has the potential to become writing center legend:

In the hour or so before a regularly scheduled writing center staff meeting, the writing center director observes staff as they worked with clients, particularly the one staff member engaged in a synchronous online tutorial—something that the director had wondered if clients would opt to use, given the need to learn to use the needed chat program. Looking over the tutor’s shoulder, the director talked to the tutor about the tutorial, its process, ease and difficulties, as well as the tutor’s sense

of how the client was responding to the advice given and to the online tutorial itself. The tutor mentioned that the process was slow and that she really wished she could talk (f2f) with the client in order to push the discussion to a needed level of depth about the project. Sensing the tutor's need to return to the tutorial, the director moved on.

Two students were using the center's computers in the adjacent room: one printing a paper; one "talking" online. Glancing at the screen, the director realized with a jolt that the student was talking to the tutor sitting fewer than twenty feet away, a situation the tutor was not aware of. The student had opted for the online tutorial because, "I wanted to be able to leave anytime without feeling guilty. And, I thought I could just get my questions answered and not have to talk about all that other stuff the tutors always want you to talk about, like who I'm writing to and why I need more info."

RESEARCHING AND ASSESSING THE "WIRED" WRITING CENTER

As demonstrated throughout this collection, there exist any number of exciting next steps for members of this community to explore within the concept of the wired writing center—video conferencing, distance learning, virtual conferencing spaces, etc. One area that has not received the detailed discussion it should, however, is that of needed types of research related to the technological innovations that writing centers have or are considering implementing. A host of questions about online tutoring, for instance, need to be investigated: What types of writers benefit the most from online tutoring? Are gains in writing development consistent between (f2f) and virtual f2f conferences? What are the dynamics of online talk in comparison to (f2f) conversation? The lack of detailed discussion about how to begin to methodically research and assess our online activity has many sources, including the following:

- We are caught up in the rush to get our programs online.
- We are just beginning to zero in on the types of questions we can and should ask.
- We are not generally familiar with or conversant about research methodologies that might apply to this area of writing center practice, and we are general suspicion about the results of such study.

Stuart Blythe (chapter seven) provides a primer for those members of the writing center community who wish to build into their forays into electronic communications, for example, the types of careful and audience aware planning steps and research necessary to more successfully tailor online services to the needs of actual, not hypothetical, users—users who often come to our services with radically different agendas and needs than we might wish for them or even imagine. Usability research is essential, at some level, to help us create and to justify technology based writing center innovations. Additionally, while it is not always easy, a point

Stuart reiterates, the benefits of doing this type of work are many and can lead us to begin to carry out other types of needed investigation.

Raising the issue of needed research is almost routine call-to-action for the writing center community, one put before the community, it seems, every few years (Neuleib 1984, North 1984 “Writing Center”, Severino). As such, I replicate and reiterate comments and charges others have made while raising research issues that I consider promising, enlightening, warranted—even, admittedly, fun—that present themselves as a direct result of the community’s exploration of the uses to which it can put technology. Implicit in the following research agenda are the makings of any number of tutor research projects, master’s theses, doctoral dissertations, and grant proposals.

1. Who uses our OWL? How?

Although I know that initial data keeping is underway in many places, there are currently no published analyses of the user/audience demographics of any OWL or of how these users interact with the site and the available information and services. While this may not be the easiest data to collect, it seems essential for a number of reasons: to inform specific, concerned stakeholders about the OWL’s activity, either to justify maintenance or expansion of budgeted time and monies; to identify the writing support needs of this population of writers, particularly if these needs differ from those identified among users of the physical writing center; to analyze if the current configurations of the service encourage a critical use of the service(s) and increasingly mature approaches to the writing process and the issues that surround it.

Several relatively simple data collection strategies offer a start in this research project, particularly “hit counters” and questionnaires. Because most OWLs are web based, using HTML coding, it is easy to embed a “hit counter” to track the number of times the site is accessed. And, most websites do so. Yet, to get a more accurate picture of how the site is used, these tallying devices need to be part of every page in the site. Considered individually and together, the numbers provide a rough composite of the site’s high and low demand areas, findings that may correlate to user’s perceptions of most/least usefulness. A fascinating project would be to see the extent to which these perceptions do/do not coincide with the findings of composition research into composing processes of novice and experienced writers.

The down side of this strategy, however, is the realization that the data collected is highly unreliable, as these counters do not discern between new users and users who, in moving within a site, return to a specific page several times on the way to other pages. Yet, for an initial, low-risk research project, this activity could yield tentative information on which to begin to test the validity of many assumptions that undergird the site’s mission and structure.

Questionnaires offer another line of research into OWL users, their experiences, and motivations. Because of the manner in which OWL users access these

sites, it seems entirely possible—most likely with the assistance of outside technical expertise—to trace many users to their home email accounts where a questionnaire can be sent. Additionally, it is easy to build a questionnaire into the site itself. In both cases, response depends on the user—they become a self-selecting group, and, thus, their responses cannot be taken as normative—a problem encountered whenever one attempts to research a population using questionnaire instruments. Yet, for the purposes of developing research questions on which to build research projects designed to garner more reliable results, this approach is a good starting place. Additionally, the gathered responses are often illuminating.

As to the question of how do writers use online services, Barbara Monroe has provided a groundbreaking analysis of online tutorial interaction. Chapter one of this book should provide a model for many writing center scholars who have the requisite background in linguistics and discourse analysis to replicate her study both to corroborate the patterns she found and to expand on them. There is much to be learned about issues of access, power relations, gender differences and user profiles, online conversational patterns, tutorial dynamics in the absence of physical and contextual paralinguistic cues from this type of analysis of the online tutorial. And, by extension, there is much to be learned about the physical (f2f) tutorial interaction from these studies as well. By comparing what we know about (f2f) tutorials with what we can learn about virtual f2f tutorials, we may begin to find answers to a pressing pedagogical question, one with important implications for writing center administration and planning: What client groups benefit the most from online tutoring in terms of their growth as writers?

2. What defines a successful online tutorial? What does one look like?

David Coogan (chapter two) and Barbara Monroe provide a jump start to an fruitful and needed area of writing center research by recording and analyzing the online tutorial and by raising a number of important questions about its relation to the type of face-to-face (f2f) interaction found in the physical writing center tutorial. This inquiry must continue if we are to answer a number of critical questions about virtual tutoring, of which the following are representative examples:

- Does/can the online tutorial work effectively and efficiently with higher-order composing concerns?
- What does the lack of paralinguistic cues in the virtual tutorial do to the tutorial in terms of how the interlocutors interact and how they define their roles, the conversation strategies employed, the way(s) in which turntaking and collaboration is signaled, how emphasis and empathy is presented, read, and maintained?
- What are the cues tutors use to assess their client's level of engagement and commitment to the tutorial?

- Do pacing differences between synchronous and asynchronous online tutorials affect the type and quality of the tutorial interaction and the participants' attitudes?

3. What are the costs of going online?

A refrain common to conference sessions devoted to computer applications in the writing center addresses the unexpected costs of getting and maintaining both computers themselves and online services. Yet, the discussion rarely gets specific: how much did it cost to do X at Y? Admittedly, the dollar costs of computer equipment is hardly static; however, there is a need for members of the community to make a public accounting of the costs incurred in wiring their centers. Other programs need a conceptual ballpark in which to play as they plan and budget their technologically mediated writing center activities.

Beyond presenting in specific dollar amount the costs of creating and maintaining such services as those described in this book, we need people to undertake a more detailed, broader perspective cost analysis. There are costs incurred in attempting any innovation in the writing center and, most of these costs are not immediately translatable into specific dollar figures. For places to start this line of inquiry, consider the following questions: How much is the director's time worth to plan for and to oversee the implementation and upkeep of an OWL? How will this time be replaced in order to ensure continued coverage of the director's preexisting duties? How much is the tutorial staff's time worth while they are trained to tutor in a virtual writing center? What are the costs in terms of replacement time for staff and equipment designated to these new endeavors? What is the impact of such innovation on the center's materials, fixed costs, and services budget? What are the costs in terms of the center's productivity, mission, and staff morale?

4. How should we theorize and/or modify the writing center's mission to reflect technology's influence?

At the same time that writing center practitioners are faced with the question of what to do with the available technology at their disposal, a number of converging factors suggest the necessity to reexamine the writing center's traditional mission in order to determine if it should be modified. Linked to the technological explosion in education is the rapidly expanding and highly competitive distance education market. Most colleges, many private companies, and even some secondary institutions, are beginning to offer credit bearing coursework via the internet and the WWW. In the face of these developments, the writing center needs to think carefully about its mission and its duty to students and to its home institution (often competing duties). This (re)assessment will require us to review the theories and practices on which we define our current mission, and may require us to retheorize the center in terms of its mission and configuration; we should also entertain the possibility that the writing center as we have known it

has served its purpose and is now facing its demise or absorption into other service providers.

In this line of thought, Selfe and Hilligoss (1994) provide a possible starting point for intrepid members of the writing center community in their attempts to theorize and critique the wired writing center and its role within literacy education. They write,

As teachers and researchers, we need to study literacy, with computers as an important feature of the setting and the means, a feature that changes literate practices and our understanding of them but neither wholly sustains nor destroys any given literacyIf we have wrongly identified text with literate knowledge, the next fallacy may be “computer knowledge,” in which the computer—even a certain kind of computer—becomes the new picture of literate orientation. This is a real possibility.” (339)

While these issues are broad and daunting, they are ones that the writing center community must address in order to assure its intellectual and ethical high standards. They may also help to ensure its continued existence in the current or revised form.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this introduction and the start of this book, it seems only fitting that I stop straddling the virtual fence and take a position on the issue of the wired writing center. Given the overall guardedness of my preceding remarks, it would be easy to mistakenly conclude that I am not a proponent of online writing center and other forms of computer mediated writing center activity. However, I am an irrepressible optimist, albeit fused to a deeply embedded strain of pragmatist and realist. As such, the optimist in me strongly supports the efforts that are underway in the writing center community to explore what opportunities that await them in the virtual frontier of online education. My pragmatic/realist side whispers into the virtual wind, “Be prepared before you go. Acknowledge the risks, even if/as you choose to venture forth.”

This guarded optimism may explain the source of one of my still unreconciled fears about online writing centers, a potential result of a lack of foresight about these very diverse and exciting developments described in this book. While I am concerned by the rush to do everything imaginable with the available technology within the context of the writing center, it is not the experimentation that gives me pause. My abiding hope is that in the midst of our enthusiasm, we do not abandon the very powerful set of ideals and values that have been the writing center community’s hallmark. It is possible that the idea of the writing center we value may become so diffuse, spread so thin, that our virtual enactments no longer resemble that powerful ideal. It seems possible to sacrifice more than we realize (or, rue in hindsight) to the gods of technology, progress, and public demand.

Throughout the process of bringing this book to fruition, I have been continually reminded of the writing center community's ability and willingness to face up to its need for careful assessment and critique of its actions. Each author has done so in a way that serves as a model to those who wish to follow the trails they are blazing across virtual territories that may become writing center domains. I find my colleagues' exploration of such technologically mediated activity as synchronous online tutorials using such virtual environments as MUDs and MOOs exciting, engaging, and stimulating. In fact, it is the sum of the positive reactions I have experienced during the past four-to-five years of unprecedented development of computer mediated writing center resources that makes my present critique possible. Following in the footsteps of my intrepid virtual pathfinders, including many represented in the following pages, reading the narratives of their activities to date, trying on their virtual sites and services for fit (size, aesthetic, ideological), has allowed me to gain my current, cautiously optimistic, perspective about the wired writing center and its future.

Thus, in keeping with the overall careful, yet optimistic tone of this book, I echo the entertaining, but very serious, admonition with which Peter Carino ends chapter twelve:

If OWLs are going to carry us into flight rather than eat us like rodents, if MOOs are going to produce more milk than dung, if we are going to cruise the information superhighway without becoming roadkill, our vigilance will need to equal our enthusiasm. I think this history shows that generally it has, though not always in the best proportions, and will continue to do so. The question will be whether we can remain vigilant in the inertia of our enthusiasm.

If the contributions of the authors presented here—and, by extension, the contributions made by the members of the writing center community to whom these writers refer to and build upon—are as representative of the best that this community has to offer as I believe they are, the future looks very good indeed for this community of educators to enact and maintain a richly textured, critically self-aware vigilance directed at the reasons we choose and the methods we embrace for wiring the writing center. No doubt the efforts to come will be as challenging, as productive, as exciting, as revealing, and, in all honesty, as much fun as the efforts that have brought the writing center community to its current space(s)-place(s).

NOTES

1. I wish to thank Peter Carino, Ray Wallace, and Carla McDonough for reading and responding to drafts of this introduction. Their input proved essential.