

Theoretical Underpinnings of Online Writing Labs (OWLs)

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Introduction

There is no such bird as “*the* Online Writing Lab” (OWL) because, in fact, there are as many variations of an OWL as there are OWLs. Each institution with an OWL has developed it to reflect its own vision of how the virtual writing center should look and how it should serve its clients, usually students and faculty. Thus, there are as many OWLs as there are institutions claiming one. The purpose of this chapter is to consider the theoretical underpinnings that are common to most OWLs as virtual writing centers, despite the variant natures of individual OWLs.

To explore OWLs theoretically, first I will consider them as outgrowths of traditional writing centers, examining particularly their connections with Current-Traditional, Neo-Classical, Expressivist, and Social Constructivist writing theories. Second, I will consider OWLs functionally as sites of learning support that reflect these theoretical stances. Specifically, I will examine an OWL’s potential to provide learning materials, online tutorials, publication spaces, and professional development opportunities. Third, again in relation to the theoretical stances that OWLs appear most to engender, I will explore the OWL’s potential and challenges in providing outreach and support to the wider learning community by extending the boundaries of traditional writing centers and establishing contact zones of inclusive learning support for traditionally marginalized students. Fourth, I will address how OWL theory can be developed at the institutional level and beyond by envisioning the OWL’s innate place in writing program design. Throughout this chapter, I will tackle two particular issues that seem to require much more discussion among writing professionals. First, I will consider in what ways OWLs fit and do not fit the theoretical paradigms to which they most seem to be related, suggesting finally that we should adopt a theory-building stance when it comes to online writing instruction (OWI) and Internet-based learning assistance overall. Second, I will suggest research directions that may assist writing program administrators, writing center directors, and learning support professionals in designing future OWLs that address American higher education’s changing needs.

Theory, Traditional Writing Centers, and OWLs

Most OWLs have strong ties to the theoretical schools of thought that underpin traditional writing centers. OWLs tend to reflect strongly the Social Constructivist and the Neo-Platonic Expressivist approaches to writing instruction. To differing degrees, many OWLs also reflect connections to Neo-Classical and Current-Traditional groundings (Hewett, 2001). I will discuss OWL theoretical groundings from the least-to-most actively acknowledged, ending with Social Constructivism as the most frequently cited contemporary school of thought.

The Current-Traditional paradigm, supposedly abandoned by most writing professionals in the early 1980's (Hairston 1982), focuses almost exclusively on the formal nature of writer's text and on grammatical correctness, which can be described as attention to product over process. Working within this paradigm, tutors read student writing, often with pen in hand, to correct or fix the text to the standard desired by most college teachers. According to Murphy and Sherwood (1995), the Current-Traditional approach to writing instruction influenced writing centers most from their inception during the 1930's (2-3) through the mid-1970's, when composition and writing center practitioners eschewed this paradigm. However, remnants of the Current-Traditional influence do remain in tutorials where tutors proofread, edit, and correct student writing—a practice that certainly exists, but to which few would admit. Although understandably, many writing center directors and OWI professionals actively would discourage this more directive approach to tutoring, Beth Rapp Young (2000) expresses a helpful opposing view about students' needs for direct instruction in how to proofread, online or not. Another tutorial approach that can be linked to the Current Traditional school of thought is that of handouts and study aides for mechanical and grammatical correctness, which usually are developed outside the context of an individual's writing. However, the value that such exercises have for some students suggest that they should not be dismissed as "bad" pedagogy; many popular OWLs, such as Purdue University's OWL, provide a rich array of thoughtfully developed handouts as their primary function.

The Neo-Classical approach usually is not considered among the major theoretical paradigms grounding writing center work, yet it bears mention in this chapter because there are ways that OWLs, and probably their traditional counterparts, incorporate this school of thought in practice. The Neo-Classical paradigm reveals itself in an attention to classical writing instruction as found in the Aristotelian and Ciceronian traditions and has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity among writing professionals, as evidenced by a variety of textbooks focusing on classical rhetoric (Crowley and Hawhee, 1998; Crusius and Channel, 1999; Corbet and Eberly, 2000;

Fahnestock and Secor, 2000; Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz, 2001). It privileges transactional writing over the expressive and focuses strongly on audience and purpose, with instruction leading to the development of exposition and argument as responsible public discourse. The classical “canon” of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery are addressed with particular attention to the development of logical and supportable claims and reasons for these claims. Style often is addressed as levels of formality conforming to the audience and intended purpose, as opposed to individual expressive preference. Both traditional writing centers and OWLs may engage Neo-Classical theory at the invention level by coaching students in formulary heuristics (e.g., Aristotle’s Topoi and Burke’s Pentad) and in argument development and analysis (e.g., Toulminian analysis). Online tutorials and handouts may teach and provide some of these heuristics. Synchronous OWL tutoring may lend itself particularly well to coaching students in invention strategies, many of which originate in the Neo-Classical tradition. Text-sharing and whiteboard platforms complement the use of visual aids like charts and tables for formulary idea development (Hewett, 2001).

During the mid-1980’s, the Neo-Platonic Expressivist paradigm gained acceptance through the works of Peter Elbow (1973, 1981), Donald Murray (1978, 1985), and Ken Macrorie (1970). Stephen North’s (1984, see also 1982) vision that the writing center should be understood as more than a “fix it” or skills-mending shop supports the general movement away from the Current-Traditional paradigm. That a writing center’s purpose is to develop writers and not necessarily particular texts has become a rallying cry for writing center professionals and has been so integrated into practice that North’s words have become a natural part of the literature (see, for example, Monroe 10). Expressivism, which appears to embody North’s vision, views writing as a means of self-discovery and a way to develop authentic voices (Murphy and Sherwood 3). Tutors encourage this development through probing, directive “Socratic” questions or through more open-ended questioning. Expressivism reveals itself in both traditional writing centers and OWLs, where many consultants encourage student ownership of the writing and choose not to write on, or embed comments in, the writer’s essays. For some, a primary concern is who “holds the pen” or types on the keyboard, which symbolizes textual “ownership.” In OWLs, as well as other OWI, consultants use the asynchronous (non-real time) and synchronous (real-time) online platforms to question and encourage writers to investigate their own ideas and to critically reflect on the implications of their thinking and writing. Both asynchronous and synchronous teaching interactions in the forms of text exchange, multi-user domains [MUDs], object-oriented MUDs [MOOs], instant chat, and whiteboard media enable such questioning.

The third paradigm that Murphy and Sherwood (1995) outline is that of

Social Constructivism, from which the term “collaborative learning” gained prominence in the mid-1980’s; it remains a focus of contemporary composition theory and practice. This paradigm anticipates that writers who work together to build consensus and to learn the language of particular discourse communities will become interdependent, and thus more successful, learners. In the Social Constructivist view, learners often work in peer groups and the value of learning collaboratively is elevated over the singular voice of any one writer or tutor (3-4). Early proponents of Social Constructivism in writing instruction include Kenneth Bruffee (1984, 1993), Marilyn Cooper (1989), and Patricia Bizzell (1979, 1986). Bruffee’s ideas, which have influenced strongly both the writing center community and the entire writing profession, bear further discussion here.

Bruffee (1993) separates what he called foundational learning, or cognitive knowledge that is transmitted from instructor to learner, from non-foundational learning, or consensus building. His intent primarily is to teach students the “craft of interdependence” through the focused, but open-endedness of a task undertaken as a group (1). He views collaboration among learners as necessary to the process of developing fluency in the language of a knowledge community such as the academic community, which is central to becoming a viable part of that community (3). Bruffee “assumes that we construct and maintain knowledge not by examining the world, but by negotiating with one another in communities of knowledgeable peers” (9). Bruffee was influenced by Paolo Friere’s (1972) ideas regarding students’ needs to “reacculturate” themselves into new communities other than those into which they had been born and raised (18-19) and by Lev Vygotsky’s (1962) theories regarding the relationship among thought, talk, and writing as internalized social talk made public (641).

In the 1980’s, writing centers were ripe for Bruffee’s belief that collaborative learning strategies and practices would assist students’ in learning to think and write critically. In the 1990’s, the importance of conversation in writing center work, as outlined by those who understood non-foundational learning as a social act, was recognized and addressed by numerous scholars (Clark, 1995; Lunsford, 1995; Murphy 1994; Gillam, 1994, and MacLennan, 1994). Social Constructivism found a natural home in writing centers, where consultants could see themselves as coaches free to develop and write ideas with, but not necessarily for, their student clients. Modeling thinking and ways to write ideas alongside the student writer, as well as engaging in inventive dialogue were legitimated as tutorial practices. For OWLs, exciting synchronous tools, like MOOs, Microsoft’s NetMeeting (Enders, 2000; 2001) and SMARTHINKING, Inc.’s™ whiteboard environment engage Social Constructivist theory by enabling consultants to coach and write with students both in the idea development and revision stages.

In contemporary traditional writing centers, these Social Constructivist

practices reside in a sometimes uneasy, but generally helpful, tension that compliments the Neo-Platonic Expressivist view that writers must find their ideas inside themselves, reaching within for the truths that they hold (Brooks, 1995). Indeed, OWLs, as virtual outgrowths of physical, traditional writing centers, may be seen as theoretically vital sites of “collaboration, interaction, and individualization” (Harris, 1998, 4), yet they retain, as well, vestiges of the Expressivist, Neo-Classical, and Current-Traditional composing paradigms.

Finally, although the following theoretical schools of thought do not appear to reflect mainstream OWL development, practitioners and researchers interested in different lenses through which to examine and develop OWLs might consider them. McAndrew and Reigstad (2001) suggest Reader Response Literary Theory, Talk and Writing, and Feminism, in addition to Social Constructivism and Collaborative Learning, as predominant theoretical bases for the face-to-face (f2f) writing conference (2-7). When looking at OWLs as inherently a part of OWI, readers also may want to consider theoretical constructs from such fields as education, training and development (especially for computer technologies), and sociology. Although I do not detail them here, cognition-based and technology theories often are applied to online instruction and may be helpful to reconsidering approaches to OWLs. See, for example, applied theories of constructivism for educational technologies (Inman, 2000); new conceptions of cognitive theory, such as situated, sociocultural, ecological, everyday, and distributed (Goodman, 2002; Wood and Smith, 2001; Lajoie, 2000; and Jonassen and Land, 2000); online communication and identity (Turkle, 1998; Kolko, 1998); theories of technology (Blythe, 1999); and hypertext/hypermedia theories (Bolter, 2001).

OWL Functionality: Sites of Learning

Although not all OWLs share the same features, they demonstrate their theoretical bases through one or more of the following functions: distribution of static and interactive learning materials, online tutorials in either asynchronous or synchronous platforms, publication spaces for model student and expert writing, and interactive and/or static venues for teacher/tutor professional development.

Learning Materials: OWLs, like their traditional counterparts, feature such services as the distribution of handouts and study aids that tend to focus on correctness in language use and in the formal aspects of strong writing. This practice inherently is connected to the Current-Traditional paradigm, where textual form and correctness hold sway. However, hardly anyone would argue that information distribution about English language use is negative. Indeed, one might argue that assisting students with such formal aspects of writing is one part of helping them to acculturate into the academic discourse

community. Furthermore, as technology has developed, it has become possible to integrate interactive learning with writing instruction materials. With the advent of the World Wide Web (WWW) and the academy's growing understanding of its potential for enhanced learning, OWL Web designers have developed the capability to expand their learning materials from virtual handout stations, where materials simply are downloaded and printed, to sites of interactive learning, where materials include interactive exercises. Such exercises range from simple true/false responses to open-ended textboxes where students can write and compare their ideas with those provided by instructional experts (see, for example, the SMARTHINKING, Inc., TM OWL). Interactive online learning materials present an exciting departure from static handouts. Empirical studies of writing developed before and after learning material use, as well as student interviews, may be helpful in discovering to what extent this innovation actually assists student learning.

Online Tutorials: OWLs have come a long way from their earliest inception as online handout distribution centers (Harris, 1998; Blythe & Harris, 1998; Thomas, Devoss, & Hara, 1998) in part because of the recent revolution in computer-mediated communication (CMC). Computers in writing programs have developed from a means of providing “skills and drills” and word processing assistance to an exciting, potentially dialogic form of writing instruction (Hewett, 2000a, 1998). Developments from Trent Batston's *Electronic Networks for Interaction*, or ENFI (1988, 1993), and the *Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment (DIWE)*, spawned various commercial networking products designed to enable students to share their writing and talk about it with one other. Thomas Barker and Fred Kemp (1990) formalized their “network theory” into a computer-based collaborative pedagogy where students “textualize” their class. They theorize that if students talk to each other using text rather than oral utterances, they will practice writing and learn a lot about their own and others' imperfect writing, enabling them to use their peers' feedback to deepen their own critical reading and writing skills. Michael Palmquist (1993) agrees that such an “immersion in writing” benefits students immeasurably (26; see also Lafer 1996 and Hawisher 1992), providing what Cynthia Selfe (1992) calls a “healthy compliment to the traditional classroom” in which teachers “could develop computer-based strategies that offer students the opportunity to effect change, to see things from different perspectives” (165). One can see the connections between CMC and OWLs primarily in the online tutorial, which is a form of individualized OWL. Online tutorials can occur either asynchronously (where students submit essays or questions to a web site or through email) or synchronously (where a real-time chat and writing platform offers immediate one-to-one tutorials).

Generally, in asynchronous tutorials, consultants “speak” by writing end commentary or embedding comments in the student's text and by modeling

strong writing. Students “reply” by choosing to develop or change their own writing in response to the consultant’s suggestions, by imitating the modeled writing, and by resubmitting a piece of writing to the OWL. Although one probably does not have to look hard to find instances of Current-Traditional-like editing, there is a strong proscription among tutors against editing or “fixing” the student’s writing. The Expressivist paradigm also is evident in the asynchronous tutorial when the tutor as reader asks probing questions of the writer, encouraging the writer to look inward for the meaning s/he wants to communicate. In typical asynchronous tutorials, because it is “non-real-time,” there is little interactivity between student and consultant, or that interactivity occurs over a longer period of time as the writing is shuttled between them. This lack of interactivity has caused some professionals to view the asynchronous tutorial as somewhat limiting in terms of its capacity (or lack thereof) to be “dialogic” as reflective of the Social Constructivist paradigm (Thomas, DeVoss, and Hara, 1998; Coogan, 1998 and 1999; Harris, 1998 and 2000; Cooper, Bui, and Riker, 2000; Enders, 2000; Harris and Pemberton, 2001). They have tended to compare the asynchronous tutorial against the traditional face-to-face tutorial in a deficit model where its only strengths appear to be such pedagogically acceptable traits as primary attention to the writer’s stated needs, locally focused embedded commentary, and global end commentary. Barbara Monroe (1998) offers an opposing view in stating that the asynchronous tutorial can use the online venue to respond to the writer’s needs in a “person to person” manner that “engage[s] clients as collaborative partners in the conference enterprise” (4). From this perspective, the basic tenets of collaborative theory in a CMC environment are engaged, as the tutorial forces the student to set the agenda in writing and later to read the consultant’s writing, applying it (or not) to his/her essay. Even the choice not to use a consultant’s suggestions implies that the collaborative process is working on the student, as choice comes from knowledge gained through collaboration with the consultant as writing informant. Occasionally, as David Coogan (1998) describes, the tutor and student form an on-going relationship that appears to lead to a more “dialogic” discussion of the writing whereby the tutor contributes ideas both as reader (listener) and as writer (speaker) in the tutorial. Coogan believes that such extended discussions engage the Social Constructivist paradigm and the collaborative nature of the tutorial becomes apparent where students can continue tutorials with an individual consultant or with multiple consultants who have access to the student’s earlier writing, focusing the tutorial on the writer and away from what might otherwise be a static focus on the text.

What we do not see in these discussions of the asynchronous tutorial, however, are the potential benefits of a tutorial modality that *may not*, in fact, always be dialogic and *may not* be an experience that the student considers collaborative. One of the strengths of asynchronous tutorials may be its non-real-time and more monologic nature. It may be beneficial that students

usually do not know their tutors and probably never will form a relationship with them. A student who conferences face-to-face with a tutor, peer or professional, may intuit a personalized reaction to his writing, and a student who conferences with his professor may simply desire to please the professor in order to gain her approval. An OWL asynchronous tutorial removes the personal nature of the response, making it somewhat more anonymous and lending the response a more impartial and objective view that may be more palatable to the student. Furthermore, the fact that the asynchronous tutorial is both anonymous and non-real-time gives the student the time to make decisions about her writing without the pressure of an immediate audience, who can somehow collaborate himself into the student's writing. What we must consider in reviewing the theoretical bases of asynchronous tutorials may come down to issues of authority, something that Candace Spigelman (1998) believes students must address whenever their writing is reviewed by others, struggling with "competing world views" where students are told to be open to collaborating with others, "to appropriate and to be appropriated," even while they must accept that their writing will be evaluated as their own (239). Such issues of authority, as well as the deficit model of comparing asynchronous tutorials against what currently are thought to be the best practices of writing center work, indicate a clear need for practice-based research that may lead to new theoretical positions regarding them.

The synchronous tutorial also presents a complex theoretical family tree. Synchronous tutorials, real-time methods of conducting the online tutorial, require more sophisticated technology than email and some Web-based asynchronous tutorials. Such tutorials may use MOOs, whiteboard technology, and other synchronous chat and text-sharing platforms. Using the interaction of real-time chat, students develop their thoughts and their writing. Newer technologies, such as Internet conferencing software with whiteboard platforms, file sharing capacity, and even voice connections, can enable both idea development as understood by Social Constructivism and Expressivism, as well as ways to model and practice, prescriptively and generatively, well-written phrases and sentences. File-sharing and whiteboard platforms can mimic the traditional chalkboard, enabling deep invention work with systematic and graphical heuristics that may spring from the Neo-Classical paradigm; they can offer the student a printable, save-able study aid for future use. Chat logs can capture and record the interaction for later review, opening invention possibilities as the student can write freely without worrying about taking notes and the tutor can guide the idea flow.

Just as the asynchronous tutorial supports Expressivist theory through probing questions and supports Social Constructivist theory through the collaborative (albeit non-immediate) dialogue between student and tutor/s, the synchronous tutorial can have a more Current-Traditional quality when the focus is on correcting grammar and addressing sentence-level issues. Although a consultant can engage the student in productive dialogue about

sentence-level problems and can move the tutorial away from merely producing a correct sentence, many students genuinely need focused grammatical guidance at some points in their writing processes. Thus, the “grammar hotline” type of synchronous tutorial can, in skilled hands, engage the theoretical paradigm that appears to meet the student at his/her point of need (North, 1982, 435). On the other hand, the synchronous tutorial that addresses invention issues, content development, or organizational principles almost always will have a collaborative nature to it; only in the hands of a consultant who does all of the talking (which unfortunately also occurs in unproductive face-to-face tutorials) does a real-time tutorial fail to engage some collaborative principles. Indeed, provided that students are allowed freely to use the products of these tutorials in their writing, all of these types of dialogue-based online tutorials can fulfill Bruffee’s vision of students learning the language of the academic discourse community through interdependent thinking.

Clearly, the theoretical bases for synchronous tutorials are richly mixed. In some iterations of whiteboard classroom environments, for example, students who are in line waiting for a tutor can watch, but not participate in, the tutorials preceding their own. Arguably, this open view to the tutorial decreases the privacy of the student being tutored, but it also increases the power of the learning situation for watching students, who cognitively become a part of a collaborative group. In other iterations of the whiteboard classroom environment, the tutorial can occur in an open chat room where numerous students work actively on one problem, sharing their ideas and understanding among the group. In the synchronous chat environment, students may receive what can be considered the added benefit of the tutor’s occasional errors, as flying fingers mistype and require corrections. If Barker and Kemp (1990) are correct that the reading and writing of imperfect student writing leads to more critically strong readers and writers, possibly the less-than-perfect communications of consultants also lead to learning. Robert Zoellner (1969) long ago theorized that a “wrap around blackboard” on which both the students and the teacher could write would provide immeasurable benefits for students who never before had seen the writing processes of an experienced writer; synchronous online tutorials provide just that benefit to students.

Unquestionably, some writing center practitioners still find difficulties with the nature of online tutorials (Mohr, 2000; Harris, 2000, 1998; Thomas, Devoss, & Hara, 1998) and may use them primarily as a means of getting students to the traditional writing center for face-to-face tutorials (Colpo, Fullmer, & Lucas, 2000). One good reason for not being enthusiastic about online tutorials of either modality is that there is not enough research into, and understanding about, what makes a good tutorial. For example, we still must address questions regarding the relative benefits of textual versus oral talk in the tutorial situation (Mohr 6), just as we must address similar

questions in the peer response group setting (Hewett, 2000a). We are in the infant stages of learning how to develop strong online tutorials and how to train tutors to engage in them; indeed, our lack of understanding of these online modalities has yet to be informed by sufficient empirical and qualitative research that identifies what students find helpful about them (Hewett, 2001). However, we are beginning these explorations and considering the OWL's potential to serve as "a starting point for further conversation and thought" (Kimball, 1997, 34) and as a means to "assist outreach efforts" (Brown 20; Silk, 1998).

Disagreement among writing specialists regarding how OWLs can function theoretically and practically is healthy, as remaining "skeptical" (Mohr 7) should lead to systematic empirical and qualitative research into whether and how both face-to-face and online tutorials actually do contribute to student writing development. The processes and products of OWL tutorials reveal complex interactions that are quite distinctive from traditional face-to-face interactions (Hewett, 2001). Such complexities and distinctions are not easily understood, despite the tendency of some professionals to use comparison of their face-to-face and OWL practices to understand them better. Indeed, to understand the OWL's potential for assisting student learning, we must think beyond mere comparison of the OWL against the traditional face-to-face tutorial and its theoretical groundings, and explore practice-based questions and explanations grounded in empirical data. Helpful research questions might include how initial and subsequent tutorial interactions reveal a student's developing understanding of writing, as well as whether and how the tutorial leads to changes in student writing.

Publication Spaces: OWL tutorials reflect the various theoretical schools of thought described above. Beyond the tutorial, however, OWLs can engage both of these theoretical stances by offering publication spaces that showcase student and staff writer's creations. By publishing student and faculty (i.e., novice and expert) writing, OWLs provide innately Expressivist spaces that engage individual writers, push them to probe their own creativity and communicative desires, and prompt idea generation. Publishing student and faculty writing is an inherently collaborative act in that students can read and compare their own work and that of peers and professionals (Gardner 81-2). Students may begin to see themselves as writers and form ideas for their own writing, building from what they see published. When the OWL website also offers a space for interactive commentary about the showcased writing, the potential benefits are obvious: students read other's writing, which is generally strong but not perfect, and respond to that writing using text, thereby practicing their critical reading, evaluation, and writing skills. A chat-room style dialogue (or multi-logue among many writers) may occur and enable students to learn another way to negotiate the discourse of the academic community. Publication using an OWL presents writing center practitioners with exciting possibilities, but these possibilities should be

studied through systematic and focused research. For example, researching the effects of OWL publication spaces may help to determine in what ways the reading of novice and expert writing actually fulfills Kemp and Barker's (1990) network theory and assists the development of good writing.

Professional Development: A fourth potential function of an OWL, and one that closely mirrors the finest of traditional writing centers, is its ability to provide space for the teacher and tutor's professional development. The use of networks, particularly the Internet, provides OWL developers with multiple ways to encourage the independent thinking of the Expressivist and the collaborative work of the Social Constructivist paradigms. Whether the tutors are undergraduate or professional writing consultants, the OWL can provide them with access to teaching materials, professional articles, and interactive discussions via asynchronous listservs or synchronous chat rooms. The value of OWL-site access to teaching materials and professional articles to tutor/teachers can enable otherwise too busy individuals to seek and find answers to a pedagogical issues. The value of a listserv or chat room for discussing the ideas that those materials raise and the tutorials and other teaching experiences of writing center professionals may go deeper yet. Monroe (1998) describes how her "mail group" became a site of "rich conversation among tutors about writing, about how they and others think and talk about writing," offering them "a space to write and be literate in new ways" (23). This interactive venue is important to community building for writing consultants who otherwise may find staff meetings difficult to attend and who need to share their stories and develop ideas together. As it does for students, the act of writing offers tutors and teachers a way to discover what they think.

Providing professional development opportunities through the OWL can have benefits beyond the needs of a writing center's tutors, however, and can extend to the entire teaching population of a particular institution or beyond. In an age where some professionals teach at two or three institutions to make ends meet, the ability to share ideas with fellow professionals over the Internet can be crucial to maintaining a sense of connectedness and the ability to grow professionally. Furthermore, if the OWL tutors live outside the boundaries of the home institution and if all of the OWL business is conducted over the Web, the online site for professional development extends the community boundaries and welcomes all comers. Such community building among writing center professionals occurs through the International Writing Center Association (IWCA) listserv *WCenter*. Useful research would interrogate this venue to learn how consultants use it and to what degree they believe their tutorial practices are influenced by it, thereby opening a dialogue about how better to serve teachers and tutors through such web-based support. Hobson and Lowe (2001) begin this important self-examination and suggest critical directions for further growth.

Community Outreach and Support As the previous section reveals, once an OWL goes on the WWW, the OWL effectively has created a fissure in the institution's physical writing center. This boundary-breaking action alone opens the OWL to students who need or want writing assistance outside of the traditional times and places where it generally occurs. In considering how an OWL can provide community outreach and support, an inherently collaborative process, it can be seen primarily as a by-product of the Social Constructivist paradigm. Providing access to writing center users beyond the immediate college community potentially opens the doors to greater numbers and varieties of writers and readers. Indeed, for those with computer and Internet access and where no barriers to student access exist, such as a password challenge that limits use to those with institutional permission, students from across the world can visit an OWL. Interactive chat rooms, as well as tutorial assistance and the availability of writing resources and models, expand the community of writers far beyond the capability of a traditional writing center's physical space. The OWL's collaborative nature potentially extends the Burkean Parlor that Andrea Lunsford (1994) envisioned for writers who use the traditional writing center.

Writing Across the Curriculum and OWLs: The OWL's theoretical ties to Social Constructivism enable and support such institutional goals as writing across the curriculum (WAC) and learning communities that combine courses from varying disciplines. Despite the fact that all students are welcome into the campus physical writing center, there can be a persistent perception that this is a place for English students only, even when the writing center resides within the bounds of a learning support system rather than the English department. An OWL's residence on the Web breaks through some of these misperceptions about who can and should use it. Sara Kimball (1998) makes a convincing argument for writing centers to develop OWL-like connections when they are involved in WAC-based outreach. Students of all disciplines need writing support, but the need is especially strong at those institutions committed to writing intensive classes for all majors and at all levels, and those that use learning communities to pair and cluster writing courses with other disciplinary courses. The OWL has the potential to extend the writing center community to them by supporting instructors and writing styles that reach across the disciplines; in turn, the OWL can lead students to more opportunities to read and practice academic discourse in their chosen disciplines. When writing specialists support and are in contact with professors of various disciplines, as occurs at institutions committed to the principles of WAC, they bring a new understanding of student needs to the tutoring table. When specialists from other disciplines, such as mathematicians or historians, have been trained to coach writing in person or online, the potential to improve student knowledge is infinite.

Contemporary college students appear to focus earlier on their disciplinary requirements than students of twenty-five years ago. Thus, despite general

education and/or core requirements, they may lose some of the interdisciplinary thinking that marked the liberal arts education of the past and find themselves both with a weaker understanding of interdisciplinary connections and among like-thinkers much sooner than may be desirable. The combination of an OWL and a WAC-based program increases the possibility for collaboration among the entire faculty, their students, and the writing center. However, as Kimball points out, the potential of combining WAC with OWL websites is somewhat poorly “exploited” (62). Future research can help to determine how best to use OWLs to combine the work of writing center and disciplinary professionals.

Inclusive Learning Support: In 1991, Mary Louise Pratt theorized that “contact zones” are spaces where people of different cultural background meet and clash, forming chaotic texts that seem to make little sense unless read as products of the contact zone. Writing specialists like Coogan (1999) have used Pratt’s ideas to consider in what ways higher education must change in order to address the literacy questions that arise surrounding pedagogy, curriculum, and technology (112). Inclusive learning support and OWLs is a tricky issue. For example, Ellen Mohr (2000) is justly skeptical of the OWL and technology in the writing center, yet her understanding of online tutoring on the OWL as merely “one dimensional” regarding its ability to assist diverse learners seems a bit reductive (6). By considering such marginalized students as non-traditionally aged adults, the physically and/or learning disabled, and the ever growing population of non-native English speaking students to be those who form the contact zones of the modern college community, it is possible to see how OWLs may offer more inclusive support for these students and, in doing so, may foster the collaboration necessary to developing learning success. Furthermore, productive use of Mohr’s skepticism can encourage practice-based research into how to address inclusively individual approaches to learning and teaching, both on- and off-line.

Non-traditional students most often are adult learners attending college classes to better their chances for job promotion or satisfaction, or for improved skills or certifications that lead to new careers. Yet, they probably are the students who are least able to take advantage of the learning support available in the traditional writing center during business hours. The potential for accessing static writing materials and for submitting essays during off-business hours through an OWL makes possible a connection with writing professionals (and with other students) that enriches college education beyond mere coursework and that generates what we, in fact, *call* “education.” However, despite the exciting the possibilities for community extension and inclusiveness for such learners, it is important to examine and consider the reality of most OWLs. Most do not have tutorial services available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; they can provide only static content and information on that basis. Some promise a twenty-four or

forty-eight hour turn-around for essays submitted asynchronously and others are so understaffed that they cannot make any promises for a tutorial review. Few OWLs actually have synchronous tutorial ability as Web design and maintenance is a costly venture that many institutions cannot afford. For greater service to the community, most need to find ways to extend their human support. When it comes to inclusive learning support, the strength of the OWL is in how much it actually complements the face-to-face interaction of the traditional writing center.

Likewise, students who have certain physical and learning disabilities may find accessing the traditional writing center more challenging than can be resolved. Helping these students is equally challenging for writing center professionals (Pemberton 12-3). The ability to access the same assistance at one's home and, perhaps, to use one's own voice activated software when a physical disability makes typing difficult or impossible, can breach the barriers of the disability. Simultaneously, this ability supports the cultural clash of this student's often unheard voice—provided that the OWL is technologically sophisticated enough to provide adequate access. Learning disabled students, as well, may find an OWL helpful. For example, when students with such challenges as auditory processing disabilities have the option to communicate with writing professionals by computer, their online tutorial experience may push their learning beyond their customary limitations to new heights. However, for those with mild or profound reading disabilities, an OWL without voice or video communication likely will be less than effective (Hewett, 2000a, 2000b, & 1998). Likewise, while voice activation software can assist mobility disabled students using OWL tutorials, the benefits of this medium have yet to be fully explored for visually and hearing impaired writing students. Undoubtedly, there is much that we need to learn about how to help both physically and learning disabled students whether in the traditional writing center or through an OWL. Future research should consider how OWLs can address the wide variety of physical and learning disabilities.

Finally, for the growing number of international students and other non-native speakers who populate both English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes and mainstream college classes, the OWL can provide an alternative working space that offers them increased access for language practice and learning. Non-native English speaking students tend not to be shy about using either a traditional writing center or an OWL (Powers 96-7), but the added advantage that OWLs provide in terms of using text to talk about their texts may benefit them in the same ways that CMC is theorized to benefit native speaking students. Further, the broader student/faculty community enabled by an OWL may provide non-native students with a greater sense of belonging in the ongoing academic conversation that comprises our Burkean Parlor. This potential is especially important when we recognize that many writing consultants, both peer and professional, feel

less able, sometimes even helpless, when assisting non-native speakers (Wilson 1; Purcell 4). Because OWLs may provide more inclusive contact among non-native English speaking students and writing coaches, we can see some of the ways that such students' writing challenges (especially those of idea development and organization) actually are similar to, rather than different from, those of native speakers—thus encouraging us to learn more about how to help them in a supportively inclusive manner. Empirical and qualitative research into both cognitive and affective learning issues, however, is necessary to understand better the ways that OWLs can use technology to assist the increasing numbers of ESOL students who request writing assistance.

OWLs and Writing Program Design

In order to address how OWLs may assist student writers and the functions of the writing center generally, it is helpful to consider how an OWL may fit within the theoretical boundaries of a traditional writing center and how it may support a writing program at higher education institutions. With very few exceptions, notably those OWLs developed by commercial businesses without particular institutional ties, an OWL tends to be connected to a particular institution and usually has very close ties to the traditional writing center that spawned its development. Indeed, the physical and political location of the traditional writing center itself tends to be a point of contention (Haviland, Fye, and Colby, 2001). Often, the OWL director is also the writing center director: in effect, most OWLs are children of the parent writing centers and, as such, provide learning support primarily through the writing centers to the host institutions. And yet, the relationship is somewhat symbiotic, because it is through the OWL that the traditional writing center is revitalized and, occasionally, meets new clients who first found their writing assistance on the Web. This dually hierarchical and symbiotic relationship seems quite appropriate, as OWLs find their grounding in the theoretical underpinnings of the writing center and as traditional writing centers find themselves entering a new era, one that requires more and greater technological sophistication, as well as new theoretical paradigms that can describe sufficiently the new teaching technologies. Through their technological adaptations of CMC, OWLs extend the boundaries of the Current-Traditional, Neo-Classical, Expressivist, and Social Constructivist learning theories that are central to most writing centers, thus leading to the multiple functions of providing learning materials, online tutorials, publication spaces, and teaching resources. Furthermore, OWLs can, with funding and certain developmental goals, assist the writing center in interdisciplinary community building and inclusive learning support for traditionally marginalized students.

This theoretical examination of OWLs leads to some questions about the ways in which OWLs are, or should be, connected to local and national

institutions of higher education. Where does the OWL fit within the boundaries of the college-based writing program at both the local and national levels? Are OWLs simply “learning support” or do they have deeper theoretical and practical connections to college writing programs? I suggest here that both OWLs and the writing centers that they support are integrally connected to college writing program design, and as such should be addressed by writing program administrators both at the local and national levels. As the diagram in Figure 1 shows, the typical college writing program can be viewed as a wheel.



The spokes of that wheel comprise the concerns of the writing program as a whole, which includes applications of OWL. Preparatory writing courses for both native and non-native speakers develop student writing skills for the first year English (FYE) composition courses that are required by most colleges. Specialty writing courses that build on and extend FYE, such as argumentation, journalism, creative writing, and technical/business writing, all have necessary places in a well-rounded writing program that addresses student needs at every level. Finally, writing-intensive courses, learning communities, and writing fellows programs that support WAC-based curricula ultimately are connected to the writing program, where very often the professors who teach these multi-disciplinary writing courses receive support from the writing program administrator and English department faculty. Such writing programs naturally need support to remain viable, support that goes beyond the pedagogy of the English and other disciplinary faculty. Thus, in this model, the traditional physical writing center is the hub

of the wheel. Regardless of whether an institution's traditional writing center is considered integral to the English Department or a component of a separate learning support system, writing centers provide crucial support to writing programs, whose faculty often guide their development and provide their staffing. Without such sites of interactive and collaborative learning for inexperienced writers, the writing program's work is hampered and can fail not only at-risk students but also those who need mere nudges to push beyond writing blocks or fears that can freeze their educational success.

The OWL, then, as a child of the writing center in symbiotic relationship with it, circles and moves within the wheel's hub, supporting the traditional center and fostering learning therein. Even those rare OWLs that operate outside of particular institutional connections should have this job of supporting and upholding the philosophical ideals and theoretical underpinnings of traditional writing centers *and* of college writing programs as a whole. Indeed, the most fully developed OWLs replicate the best of writing program design by offering tutoring for students of varied abilities, writing resources, learning modules, publication space, and teacher's resources.

Conclusion

This important support function that I am suggesting does not imply that OWLs cannot have breakaway moments or flights of brilliance whereby they help to develop the new theory for OWI that must accompany the best pedagogical uses of modern technology. Indeed, OWLs, as central to the wheel's hub, may even provide the guidance to lift traditional writing centers and the writing programs they support to soaring new heights. Such heights include expanding our applications of contemporary writing theory, finding bold new uses of electronic media in learning support, transcending the boundaries of the educational community, and creating contact zones that welcome students previously marginalized in a less technological age. OWLs have the promise of "global prominence far beyond the campus" in which they are virtually nested (Harris, 1998, 13) and are in need of on-going research and development (Hewett, 2001; Blythe and Harris, 1998). Continued attention to practice-based research and development will help to uncover and expand the theoretically rich potential of OWLs.

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