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Home » **Archives** » **Spring 2009 (Volume 6 Issue 2) - Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing Centers**

Wagging the Long Tail: From Push to Pull to Create the Writing Center 2.0

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Revitalizing the writing center in a user-driven world

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The Long Tail in a Flat World

Beginning with a series of speeches in early 2004 and culminating with publication of a *Wired* article Chris Anderson describes how the long tail effects current and future business models. Anderson later extended it into the book *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*.

The concept of frequency distribution with long tails has been studied by statisticians since the late 1940s. The distribution and inventory costs of businesses like Amazon.com, eBay.com and Netflix allow the realization of significant profits selling small volumes of hard-to-find items to many customers, versus selling large volumes of popular items. Customers who buy hard-to-find or "non-hit" items describe the demographic called the long tail.

What happens when you take Web 2.0 tools like blogs, wikis, chat rooms, video conferencing and forums, mix them with a popular open-source course management system, and apply this solution to the writing center environment?

Given sufficient choices, large customer population, negligible stocking and distribution costs, the selection and buying patterns result in a Pareto distribution (also known as the 80-20 rule which indicates roughly 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes). The presence of the long tail suggests a high freedom of choice will create a certain degree of inequality by favoring the upper 20% of the items ("hits" or "head") against the other 80% ("non-hits" or "long tail").

The key supply factor determining whether a sales distribution has a long tail is the cost of inventory storage and distribution. If inventory storage and distribution costs are insignificant, it is economically viable to sell relatively unpopular products. When storage and distribution costs are high, only the most popular products will be viable. Netflix' business model is the traditional example of the long tail: because Netflix stocks movies in centralized warehouses, storage costs are minimized and distribution costs are the same for a popular or unpopular movie. Netflix therefore builds a viable business stocking a wider range of movies than the traditional movie rental store.

All well and good, one might argue: if a company sells widgets, this model might make sense. But how would any of this translate into a non-physical goods service sector environment like a writing center? Yet the social and collaborative nature of writing itself and writing center work actually lends itself to drawing on lessons from the long tail.

What happens when you take Web 2.0 tools like blogs, wikis, chat rooms, video conferencing and forums, mix them with a popular open-source course management system, and apply this solution to the writing center environment? **Sharewidely**, **H20Playlist**, **edublogs**, **readwritethink,** and **Moodle** are just a few of the platforms that allow tutors, tutees, professors, parents, and general readers to share work beyond the confines of a classroom, tutoring session, city, state, or even country. In these environments, the world is indeed increasingly flattened and connected as described in Thomas Friedman's 2005 best-seller *The World is Flat*.

Web 2.0: Just How Many Webs are There?!

Coming to grips with Web 2.0 applications in writing center work is like trying to figure out how to eat an elephant. Where does one start? A brief look at the Web's development provides assistance.

Less than ten years after going mainstream, the Web returns to its roots as a read/write tool while entering a new, more social and participatory phase (Gillmor). Many interactive features of the Web have merged into a trend many call Web 2.0–"a new and improved Web." This incarnation of the Internet blurs the line between producers and consumers of content and shifts attention from information access toward people access. New kinds of online resources–social networking sites, blogs, wikis, and virtual communities–have allowed people with common interests to meet, share ideas, and collaborate in innovative ways. Web 2.0 offers a new kind of participatory medium ideal for supporting multiple modes of learning.

The favorite format of the old Web was the *portal*, which, resembling a brick and mortar shopping center, bundled as many thematic offerings as possible. In the early years of Web commerce, the goal was to become an online shopping center. While *portal* was the buzzword of the early internet, *platform* is the keyword for the second act. Web 2.0, gives users a platform, a framework they can use. The new Web breaks with the old casting of producer on one side and consumer on the other side of the economic fence.

Many universities have not yet realized how this new technology will impact our teaching and learning environments. The old "push" model of instructional delivery is still in play, and although the learner-centered paradigm is not a new idea, the traditional teacher-centered information transfer paradigm remains entrenched, similar to the prevailing information-transfer paradigm where

teachers transfer "knowledge" to often passive, unengaged students.

This is an unfortunate state of affairs since the most profound impact of the Internet, an impact yet to be fully realized, is its ability to support and expand the various aspects of *social learning*. Social learning is based on the premise that our *understanding* of content is constructed through conversations about content through grounded interactions around problems or case studies. Studies measuring student engagement show that students who are engaged demonstrate sustained behavioral involvement in learning activities accompanied by a positive emotional tone. They select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when opportunity exists, and exert intense effort and concentration when implementing learning tasks. Participants demonstrate positive emotions during ongoing action, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest (Skinner 572).

In educational settings, social learning stands in sharp contrast to the traditional Cartesian view of knowledge and learning–a view largely dominating the way education was structured for well over a century. The Cartesian perspective assumes knowledge is a substance, and pedagogy concerns the best way to transfer this substance from teacher to student. By contrast, instead of starting from the Cartesian premise of *"I think, therefore I am,"* and from the assumption that knowledge is something that is transferred to the student via various pedagogical strategies, the social view of learning says, *"We participate, therefore we are."*

In demand-side learning, universities will find gold veins of motivated students either desiring to become a member of a particular community of practice or just wanting to learn about, make, or perform something.

Driven by the development of social learning theory and the advancement of participatory web technologies, new opportunities are becoming apparent. Learning theories, such as constructivism, social constructivism, and more recently, connectivism, form the theoretical shift from instructor or institution-controlled teaching to one of greater control by the learner (Siemens).

Web 2.0's participatory focus is ideal for supporting multiple modes of learning and for shifting the teacher-centered paradigm: consumers and producers of information and knowledge share the stage as equals, fluidly, modifying individual roles to become "prodsumers." Web 2.0's applications and platforms allow us to build communities of learners in which knowledge is constructed through conversation and interaction between all participants. Part and parcel of bringing people together is locating a center toward which they can gravitate. The writing center is historically, pedagogically, and philosophically ideally situated to be such a place. Centers' mission statements have changed over the years, but the focus of the work was generally on conversation, sharing, participation–all elements of commonality with Web 2.0.

Demand Push v. Demand Pull

The current economic downtrend in the United States has led many businesses to adopt a reflexive contractive pose. Universities, too, have responded to economic pressures with a "make more with less" attitude, trying to retrench, slash, combine, outsource, and contract their way out of difficult times. While the response might be instinctive and appeals to the need commonly described as "belt-tightening," it is also reactive and fear-based. Businesses that survive

and thrive in difficult times are those who resist the impulse to do the expedient thing and continue to offer value and excellence. A quick look at traditional news outlets illustrates the point. Mainstream media outlets are in a steep slump across major desireable demographics (which are exactly those who are also of interest to universities) compared to cable and internet media outlets which are experiencing a substantial boom. Especially interesting is the move away from the traditional evening news to "news on demand" where real simple syndication (RSS) subscriptions allow the individual news consumer to pull from a menu of available options. Menu-driven *choices* drive this model, which is evidence people still "read" the news, just not in the traditional format.

The take-away here? Unless universities want to become the Katie Couric of evening news--i.e. completely irrelevant to the user's needs--they, too, need to start accepting and eventually embrace a new approach to learning, one characterized by a *demand-pull* versus traditional *supply-push* mode of building up an inventory of knowledge in students' heads. Course offerings and support services such as writing centers must be varied and matched with individual needs, not demographic trends. Just-in-time delivery of courses (both traditional and non), needs precedence over printed catalogues indexing courses planned five years ago.

Many writing students focus exclusively on the product, the graded essay, which they have been conditioned to think of in some way as damaged, insufficient, or just plain wrong.

In demand-side learning, universities will find gold veins of motivated students either desiring to become a member of a particular community of practice or just wanting to learn about, make, or perform something. The demand-pull approach might appear to be extremely resource-intensive. But Web 2.0's vast and cost-effective platforms provide support for multiple learning styles and personal(ized) learning spaces.

In terms of what writing centers can value add to this proposition, the answer is: quite a lot. As soon as user-centered spaces of learning are created, information starts flowing: more freely, more democratically, creating a rich intellectual commons. Social media tools don't make the conversation; they support it. By understanding how social media support the human desire for conversation, writing centers can open up vibrant interactions between individuals and communities that transcend their own geographical boundaries.

Writing Center Work: Starting Conversations in the Long Tail

Many writing students focus exclusively on the product, the graded essay, which they have been conditioned to think of in some way as damaged, insufficient, or just plain wrong. They worry about small errors and often arrive at the doorstep of a writing center, clutching papers, asking: "Can someone proofread this for me?" "This" is a completely detached product for these students, something viewed as alien and frightening. Often, these writers do not see themselves as writers at all, but as beings outside the walls of the academy. A vicious cycle begins: a writer who expects to fail and at every turn finds his or her worries and fears confirmed.

But with that first step into a writing center, a paradigm shift can be set into motion: when the writer understands that we are all in "this" together; that the conversation between a writer and a reader is continuous; that they, too, have a voice in this conversation; that they, too, are part of the academy, in fact *are*

this community–a community which emerges from conversations. Yet as long as a writing center defines its space physically and locally rather than non-local and ideally, its possibilities remain limited. Writing centers can offer both local and non-local (i.e. virtual) places where "multiple channels for engagement, communication, collaboration, modeling, data visualization and simulation, sound and spatial relationships, language immersion, and opportunities for crossing physical, geographical, and even temporal boundaries" can be made available (Jarmon).

Lipman speaks of a "community of inquiry" and Wenger of a "community of practice" to show how members of a learning community both support and challenge each other, leading to effective and relevant knowledge construction. Wilson has described the characteristics of participants in online communities as having a shared sense of belonging, trust, expectation of learning, and commitment to participate in and to contribute to the community.

The world of expert, clearly-defined, and well-organized knowledge articulated by ancient philosophers and illuminated by subsequent thinkers, has given way to continual flux. Kress and Pachler sense, "…what we have here is a transition from a stable, settled world of knowledge produced by authority/authors, to a world of instability, flux, of knowledge produced by the individual" (207). Of course, this view of knowledge is controversial and challenged by those who find the shift from expert to amateur knowledge producers unsettling (Gorman; Keen).

Writing centers offering not only computers and tutors, but also reading rooms, collaboration suites, podcast centers, study zones, coffeebreak and chat places, social spaces to put up your feet and zone out for a minute or two will find their work in the long tail highly rewarding. Writing centers that allow students to pull from available options those that are useful, necessary, and even fun embrace the broad-spectrum of learning situations, becoming both communities of practice and personal(ized) learning spaces–a limitless space.

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