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Sections

Focus
Columns and
Reviews
Consulting
Training
News &
Announcements

Archives

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issues of Praxis

About Us

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Submissions

Submit an
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[Home](#) » [Archives](#) » [Fall 2008 \(Volume 6 Issue 1\) - Technology in Today's Writing Center](#)

Consultations without Bodies: Technology, Virtual Space, and the Writing Center

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The writing center as the "Great Good Place"



Rusty Carpenter

Ray Oldenburg, in *The Great Good Place*, writes about caf  s, coffee shops, bookstores, and other places at the heart of the community, making a case for the "informal public life and the Great Good Places essential to it" (x). The writing center, in many ways, tries to replicate these cozy spaces, providing a place for students to feel a sense of community with other interested writers. Some writing centers provide coffee or snacks, while others simply provide a relaxing and supportive atmosphere that promotes conversation. In large part, writing centers have embraced the role of the "great good place," although the inviting ambiance and personality do not always come across in virtual spaces. With the growing number of Online Writing Labs (OWLs), how do we convey the inviting and supporting aura in our virtual spaces and consultations?

Technology, Space, and the Writing Center

Without a doubt, technology has found a home in the writing center. Many writing centers around the country now use web sites and appointment management software in their daily work. Some also use asynchronous e-mail or synchronous, real-time, instant messaging software (IM) in their consultations. These technologies allow writing centers to reach a wider range of students, even if they are not able to visit our physical location. If these technologies allow us to meet the growing demands of our universities, what's the problem with using them?

Two potential issues for writing centers arise when we consider this question. First, technologies are often seen as uninviting. Online staff members, for example, might see the computer screen as cold, sterile, and uninviting, as Eileen Apperson-Williams and David A. Carlson's research reveals (285). Technology can also be disruptive to the learning process by getting in the way between student and consultant. Johndan Johnson-Eilola warns, "On the one hand, it seems absolutely crucial that we work to envision contexts in which technologies are integrated into humane, empowering, and ethical activities and relationships. On the other hand, it also seems absolutely crucial that we recognize the disruptive potential of technologies . . ." (70). IM technologies, for example, appear between the cracks of other work, like surfing the Internet or reading a document.

If writing centers cannot expand their physical spaces to meet their needs, virtual spaces can provide the “room” for writing centers to expand.

As we introduce new technologies into the writing center to meet changing demands, we also need to think critically about the implications of these new technologies. New technologies introduce challenges, and writing center administrators must be prepared to confront issues of impersonal and disjointed virtual spaces that do little in their current state to promote engaging conversation. Perhaps the biggest challenge facing writing centers is taking place in the online space of the internet, which is where writing centers might have more “room” to grow if physical space on the campus is scarce (Carpenter).

Writing centers are under a great deal of pressure to expand services. All too often, though, physical space is at a premium. At a given university, a writing center may be located in an academic department, language center, or multimedia center. Others are located wherever there is space—whether in the student union or in a temporary module. In many cases, writing center administrators must do the best they can with the resources they are allotted, even when it comes to physical location on campus. Carol Peterson Haviland et al. write:

Believing that what writing centers do is more important than where they are located or how reporting lines are drawn, it is easy for directors simply to make the best of whatever space and administrative structures they are offered. And, to a degree, this priority is correct; neither style nor location is a good substitute for substance. However, although location is not everything, it too is important, for material spaces have political edges that are costly if ignored. (85)

Physical spaces on the college campus, like buildings and offices, bring with them important political messages. But for the foreseeable future, writing centers will be situated wherever there is space, whether this is a central area—near the flow of student traffic—or on the periphery of campus. Writing centers, as Peterson Haviland et al. claim, will have to address spatial concerns. To a large extent, these spatial concerns will be addressed in one way or another through technology.

It is time that writing centers solidify their identity in virtual spaces. Constructing this identity online, however, is one of our biggest challenges.

As writing centers continue to find their “space” on campus, many are also exploring virtual spaces and technologies, although it seems we are doing this haphazardly. For writing centers trying to address concerns with limited physical space and location, virtual spaces offer the potential to reach students who might not otherwise physically visit the writing center’s campus location. Virtual spaces also offer the opportunity for writing centers to expand beyond their physical capacity by developing Web sites and online services such as synchronous online consultations (chats) for students. Howard Rheingold explains, “The technology that makes virtual communities possible has the potential to bring enormous leverage to ordinary citizens at relatively little cost—intellectual leverage, social leverage, commercial leverage, and most important, political leverage” (275). This intellectual, social, commercial, and political leverage is vital for writing centers, if they are to operate in less-than-ideal physical spaces. If writing centers cannot expand their physical spaces to meet their needs, virtual spaces can provide the “room” for writing centers to expand. OWLs may be the optimal solution for writing centers that are dealing with the inadequacies of their physical spaces. They are less expensive to build and do not require a physical space on campus

Refashioning the Physical

The virtual spaces that writing centers will inhabit might consider refashioned elements of the physical writing center. N. Katherine Hayles explains that communication “takes place not only through words and syntax but also through the manipulation of cyberspace parameters. In cyberspace you do not necessarily need to *describe* how you see the world; you can visually and kinesthetically create it” (317). Writing center administrators must create an inviting virtual space online that reflects values present in face-to-face spaces. Often, the physical space of the writing center will embrace a coffee-shop aura, a space where students feel relaxed as they work on their writing and talk to consultants. In physical spaces, writing consultants develop styles and strategies that will enable them to communicate and appeal to the students sitting next to them. Online, however, consultants will need to develop personas that convey the same feeling of warmth, comfort, and intellectual engagement as they do in face-to-face sessions. In an interesting study of experiences in virtual spaces, Annette N. Markham reminds us that cyberspace allows users to interact as and with words rather than bodies (79). Online, the body is not present, at least not immediately or physically. Unconstrained by physical space, the body is an “absent signifier,” as Hayles suggests (311). The body, in its physical or original state is only a representation online. In virtual writing spaces, like a synchronous online chat, the body is a name that the student or consultant enters into a field.

By recreating or refashioning elements of our physical space in virtual chats and cyberspaces, we are absorbing aspects of this space that make the writing center the "great good place" on a college campus. Allucquere Rosanne Stone explains that "[c]yberspace can be viewed as a toolkit for refiguring consciousness in order to permit things to go on in much the same way" (194). If cyberspace is our "toolkit," it is time writing centers unpack it and begin building. It is time that writing centers solidify their identity in virtual spaces. Constructing this identity online, however, is one of our biggest challenges.

Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch discusses remediation in terms of face-to-face and electronic peer review, examining the degree to which electronic communication "borrows" from face-to-face communication (8). In face-to-face consultations held in physical spaces, our identity is constructed by the way we look, talk, move, and through verbal and non-verbal cues. In virtual spaces, however, our identity is shaped largely by the words we write, textual cues, and our online personae. "This is not to say that our identity is fully determined by media, rather that we employ media as vehicles for defining both personal and cultural identity," as Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin explain (231). A vehicle for defining identity, hypertext and new media also allow consultants in a virtual writing space to convey ideas to students who are located anywhere in the world. The immediacy afforded by hypertext may allow consultants increased efficiency in cyberspace. Resources, including the internet, are only a hyperlink away. Online handouts can be viewed, shared, and saved without ever exchanging paper and without moving physical locations. Without a doubt, technology holds potential power for writing centers, but we need to understand how to use it.

Using Technology in the Writing Center

Although I certainly do not seek to eliminate or devalue the physical space of the writing center, technologies and virtual writing spaces hold great promise. Through hypertext systems and linked networks, students can access the information they need regardless of location, time, or physical constraints. However, writing center administrators must seek to understand these new technologies and the ways in which consultants and students interact with them. Johnson-Eilola, for example, explains that "the ubiquitous nature of IM allows it to emerge in the spaces between other forms of work; its fragmentation is a strength in many situations rather than a weakness or distraction" (97). The fragmented nature of IM and other synchronous technologies presents yet another challenge for writing centers. How do we keep students engaged in these virtual spaces? How do we keep them involved in the consultation and writing process? And, of course, how do we make the virtual space, which largely relies on textual features, more inviting and engaging? Using technology effectively can be challenging, especially if technologies are implemented without serious testing and research. When our consultants are operating in a purely textual environment, like the synchronous chat space, they must consider the lack of interpersonal cues that may inhibit online exchanges. Based on my experience in developing and coordinating a growing OWL, I offer a few strategies for using technology in the online consultation:

- Discuss and explore the importance of creating an inviting online persona.
- Conduct mock online consultations during training.
- Develop concrete strategies for keeping the student involved in the synchronous online consultation.
- Establish clear parameters for online consultations.
- Consider mapping exercises that involve the writing center's online spaces.
- Solicit feedback from consultants about their online consultations on a regular basis.
- Discuss the practical and theoretical differences between online consultations and face-to-face consultations.
- Analyze anonymous online consultation transcripts.
- Discuss useful textual cues for online consultations to promote engagement between consultant and student.

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