EXPLORING THE REPRESENTATION OF SCHEDULING OPTIONS AND ONLINE TUTORING ON WRITING CENTER WEBSITES

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Writing centers provide invaluable writing assistance to students, and students who have used writing centers typically come to this conclusion themselves. Despite these positive responses to writing center tutorials, motivating first-time users to go to the writing center can be challenging. Because students turn to the Internet with many of their questions in life, it is likely that a writing center website is the first image of a writing center that many students encounter. Because of this, a writing center's website can be an important persuasive tool in helping students become excited about visiting the center and using its services. More importantly, it is the first step in a user's experience with a writing center.

We need to examine these sites to learn how we can benefit more students by getting more students to use the center. In this article, I investigate how writing center websites can more consciously mold students' experiences in a positive fashion. Writing centers can shape the ease of the student experience of using their websites and centers by employing usability principles and considering Burke's rhetorical principle of identification. Specifically, because students today use the Internet and mobile devices more than ever, I focus on how writing centers are meeting student needs through their methods of scheduling and their availability of online tutoring. To answer this question, I examine 100 writing center websites for their methods of scheduling and availability of online tutoring.

Online tutoring relates to scheduling and identification because they are both things that provide options to students, and thus are a way to identify with students rhetorically and help them see how the writing center can meet their needs and how it values their time. They are also both topics that students need to know about and would likely first learn about on the writing center's website. I will first examine usability theory and its relationship to how websites are designed.

Literature Review
Usability Theory

In order to attract more students to the writing center, it is important that the writing center website is designed to be easily used by as many members of the target audience as possible. Usability theory and user-centered design are useful for implementing this goal.

Usability theory has its roots in science and engineering and was initially intended to "validate a product from the standpoint of utility" for a company—making sure it worked, essentially (Barnum 6). Eventually, through the work of researchers such as Gould and Lewis, usability began to focus more on user experience. This shift in thinking is marked by the terminology change from usability to user-centered design, though both refer to many of the same theories and principles (Barnum). For the sake of clarity, in this article I use the term usability, though I mean for this to also encompass user-centered design.

At its center, usability's goal is for people to be able to use a product "quickly and easily to accomplish their own tasks" (Dumas and Redish 4). Of course, "easy" is a subjective term. In general, users care about the amount of time it takes to accomplish a task, the number of steps it takes to accomplish that task, and "the success they have in predicting the right action to take" (Dumas & Redish 5). Thus, usability deals with how easily an audience can use a product. In this instance, the product is the writing center with an audience of prospective student-clients.

The usability concept of "user story" is particularly useful when focusing on audience issues. The user story answers the question of what a user wants to do with a product (Six). In essence, the user story tells us how users would like a product to function. For a writing center, many users want to schedule an appointment or to figure out how to schedule an appointment, typically by first using the writing center's website.

The concept of the user story works well with the rhetorical concept of identification. The Burkean rhetorical principle of identification rests on the idea that people must see their interests reflected in the speaker's interest in order to be motivated. The

concept of the user story helps us to determine the user's interest. Hence, writing centers must demonstrate to students that they can help them reach their goals, that they understand their user story. The question becomes, then, who is the audience and what do they want? Usability theory and identification thus prompt us to understand users in order to better connect with them (Barnum).

Principle of Identification with Writing Center Student-Clients

At the core of usability theory is the need to understand or know an audience. Who is the writing center's audience? Scholars have studied them (including, for instance, Bishop), though these types of quantitative studies in writing center literature are not as numerous as a researcher would like.

Most simply, a writing center's prospective clients are writing students at a college or university. Many are younger than their writing instructors (though most certainly not all). Almost half of them are generally freshmen (Carroll, Pegg, and Newmann). It is also clear that many instructors of writing require students to go to the writing center or refer them there, but simply asking students to go to the center is perhaps not enough motivation for many of them to do so. In her 1990 article, Bishop surveyed students who chose not to attend the center and those who did in order to discover what motivated students to get help with their writing and take the steps necessary to use the resource that is the writing center. She discovered that students wanted to know that they would get something, "some recompense," for receiving writing center tutoring (Bishop 37). Her survey responses suggested that instructors tell students how it would help their grades or add extra points to papers. Overall, students want to know that going to the writing center is worth their time and effort—in her survey, 53 percent of students who chose to not use the center felt that they did not have time; 38 percent felt that they did not have a need for help with their writing (35). These numbers suggest that students feel that the writing center cannot help them—they do not understand how it can help them fulfill their goals.

What are these goals with which tutors can help students? That likely varies somewhat amongst the masses of students, but, in the words of Stephen North, "they will…be motivated to (say) finish writing; to be finished with writing; to have their writing be finished. They will be motivated to have the writing they submit for a class win them a good grade, whatever they imagine that will take: for it to be mechanically correct, or thoroughly documented, or to follow the instructor's directions to the letter" (North 82). This is not to say that students are uncomplicated and will never engage deeply with their text, but that they may not realize that they might come to do these things at the writing center. Students need to realize that the writing center can help them to write a successful paper, whatever their definition of 'successful' may be.

Amicucci explains the importance of considering student needs in her chapter on enticing distance nursing students into using the writing center. As Amicucci explains, when we are looking at students in a very specific program at a particular university, writing centers can create a dialogue to understand needs. On the broader front, however, writing center directors, professors, and tutors can attempt to figure out the most basic writing-related needs of all our students in order to reach as many of them as possible. She notes "finding common ground with the Nursing students required understanding [their] needs" (66). Amicucci goes on to explore how these students began using the center more when they received more information about it, stating a "need to clearly communicate the goals of these programs to students" (73). Ultimately, Amicucci achieved success through working with Nursing faculty to create targeted modules for their students and finding a "common language" (71). She was thus able to build a connection with her target audience.

The first opportunity for building connections with writing center audiences according to the principle of identification is found in the moment students first contact the center to find information and make an appointment. An increasing percentage of writing centers now have an online presence, and many of our students will get their first impression of the writing center from the center's website. In Burkean terms, this is the writing center's first and best chance to identify with students and thus to cause "the audience to identify itself with the speaker's interest" (46). Burke argued that identification is the key to rhetoric; an audience needs to see how their interests can be matched up with the writing center's cause. If no such match is apparent, any other attempt to persuade the students that the writing center is a worthwhile part of the writing process will almost certainly fail.

The interests of the students in this situation are pretty clear: to fulfill a requirement given by their instructor and/or to improve the grade they get on their essay. The cause of the writing center is likewise straightforward: to be seen as a valuable part of the writing process by providing useful advice. Students need to see that the cause of writing centers corresponds with their interests in order for them to want to use them: they need to identify with the

writing center. This need to identify provides an opportunity for writing centers to build connections with students, particularly through a writing center's website content and design. This principle of identification can be implemented through a writing center's website in a few ways. Because writing centers cannot necessarily assure students that they will receive some sort of payoff for visiting the writing center (e.g., a better grade), they might instead try to identify with students by making using the writing center an easy thing to do. When a writing center makes it easy for students to access it, this can then help students to identify with the writing center. Thus, this article examines the number of ways writing centers schedule appointments, as well as the availability of online tutoring. Both of these methods relate to how writing centers represent themselves as valuing student time and identifying with student needs.

Methodology

To discover how writing centers are using their websites to help students set up appointments and whether they're providing online tutorials, this study analyzes one hundred college and university writing center websites. The writing centers were chosen to give a representative cross-section of different parts of the country, public and private institutions, and undergraduate (including community colleges) and graduate schools. The data is made up of sixteen community colleges, twenty-six private universities, and fifty-eight public universities. Many of the websites were accessed using links from the International Writing Centers Association's list of "writing centers online."[1] Specifically, this study examined how the websites discussed and allowed for scheduling online and whether schools offered online tutoring. In order to do this, the author examined the 100 writing center websites for explicit instructions on how students can schedule appointments. When reviewing the sites, the author looked for terminology such as "how to make an appointment" and "for appointments…" (as well as variants of these phrases, such as "tutorials," "sessions," and "scheduling") in order to determine how appointments could be made by students. After initial review of the sites and their terminology, the author counted instances of terminology such as "walk-in" appointments, "in-person" scheduling, "phone call" appointment scheduling, and "online" appointment scheduling, as well as variants referring to these methods. This study only reviews the choices that are thus made obvious from the websites themselves. In some instances,

other appointment-making options might be possible, but they were not made explicit according to the standards of this study. The author then looked for whether the websites included an option for online tutoring.

Results

As previously stated, the very first encounter a student has with a writing center is generally through the center's website. From the website, students discern writing center hours, location, and how to make an appointment. This section first examines the scheduling options that the writing centers' websites made clear are available to students. Then, this section examines whether centers provide online tutoring.

Scheduling

It quickly became apparent in this study that students can schedule appointments in writing centers in three ways: scheduling in-person by physically coming to the writing center, calling the center, and scheduling online. The websites suggest that only 20 of the 100 schools (20%) offered students all three scheduling options. Four centers (4%) failed to explicitly mention how to schedule an appointment on their sites. 32 centers (32%) offered only 1 method for scheduling.

Of these 32 centers that offered only one method of scheduling, 5 centers required students to call to make appointments, while 19 required online scheduling. Of all the centers, 53% allowed students to schedule online in some fashion (whether via scheduling websites or email). Of these centers, 19 of the 53 centers (36%) required students to schedule their appointments online (as their only scheduling option).

Online Tutoring

In addition to scheduling, this study also examined whether writing centers offer online tutoring. Of the writing center websites examined in this study, 43 centers overall (43%) offered online tutoring in some form. 16 schools that offered online tutoring did not offer online scheduling (37.2%); Only 28 centers (of the 53% overall) offering online scheduling also offered online tutoring (28%).

Discussion of Results

This section first discusses scheduling and what these results show about writing centers and how well they help students to identify with their goals. Then, it discusses online tutoring in relationship to scheduling, student identification, and usability.

Scheduling

Many schools (53%) allowed students to schedule online, which makes them approachable (students who are used to using computers likely find it easy to schedule online) for students. However, forcing students to do their scheduling online hurts this approachability somewhat (19% required students to schedule online as the only available method). Requiring one method of communication, which this examination suggests 32% of writing center websites do, limits students' abilities to make appointments and might prevent writing center usage in situations where students are uncomfortable using computers for scheduling or have limited Internet access. Of course, some websites that only explicitly allowed students to schedule online also listed a phone number; these schools may be amenable to scheduling over the phone for students, though this possibility is unclear to users. Other schools very explicitly required the online scheduling by stating that no other form of scheduling was allowed.

On four sites, a failure to adequately and completely discuss scheduling at all drastically fails these writing centers and students; it creates a disconnect between the writing center's purpose and the student's needs. A website's failure to discuss the particular information that students are searching for causes students to fail in their tasks of scheduling, at least initially. Students thus do not see how the center could fit their needs and they may feel frustrated because they took the time to find information that simply was not present. This frustration is likely to cause students to no longer seek the services of the writing center.

Overall, writing centers can identify and connect with the most students by offering a variety of ways to schedule appointments. Because we want as many students as possible to be able to easily set up an appointment with the writing center, usability theory suggests that providing as many means as possible to schedule appointments is most usable for this audience. Universities and colleges have a range of students with a multitude of varying needs and preferences; one method of scheduling, for instance, online scheduling, will not appeal to everyone. A blind student may prefer to schedule over the phone whereas a deaf student may prefer the online option. On-campus students with free time in the middle of their day might prefer to just drop in to make appointments. Writing centers need to make it as easy as possible to make appointments; students do not want to go the extra mile to do something they feel unsure about in the first place—and since many students come to the writing center (at least at first)

because of a requirement, they likely feel some apprehension at this new experience. In essence, writing centers need to make their centers easy to use, and scheduling is one way of making the experience less anxiety-ridden for students.

Online Tutoring

Forty-three percent of writing centers in this study offered online tutoring, nearly half. Of these 43 centers, 16 centers (37.5%) did not have online scheduling for their online tutoring appointments. At the time of this study, only 28 centers with online scheduling also had online tutoring. Offering online tutoring without online scheduling is at odds with the principle of identification and usability in general. Students want their writing center session to be as painless as possible. If students are already on the computer to schedule an appointment, allowing them to remain on the computer for their session could be easiest for them and would jive with the relationship the center has begun to build with the student through online scheduling. Through providing online scheduling, the writing center creates the narrative that they promote and believe in computer use for writing tasks. When scheduling online is mandatory, not providing an online tutoring option creates a disconnect that is possibly shocking—requiring students to use the computer for one act and then totally prohibiting computer use disrupts the act of identification and the connection the student is working to make with the center. When students are trying to understand the writing center and its value to them, this disconnect in values is confusing. More research is necessary to discover how students deal with this type of writing center narrative. The next section discusses recommendations of this study and future avenues of research.

Recommendations

This study's findings suggest two recommendations implicitly tied to usability and identification—writing center websites need to offer options and actively seek user feedback. It is important to note that not all writing centers have the resources or control necessary to change many of the aspects of their websites. It is still relevant, though, to know methods of improvement in the event that an opportunity to change practices arises.

Recommendation 1: Offer Options

First, writing centers can effectively identify with students by offering options. These options would include multiple methods of scheduling—like online

(via email or a scheduling program), over the phone, or in-person. Allowing drop-in appointments (when feasible) would also meet some students' needs. In addition, providing multiple methods (face-to-face and online) for tutoring sessions can help with identification—some students will want, and even require, that tutoring take place online. The ease of use (for some, this means lack of travel) associated with online tutoring may help motivate students to seek it out and see how the writing center can meet their needs. Of course, as Amicucci explains, having faculty discuss the writing center with their students is still one of the most effective methods of getting students in the door or on the website—once they're on the website, though, it is up to the writing center to show students their "common ground" to solidify the connection (73). When options are available for students, it is also important to make sure that the options are then explicitly stated on the websites in a way that students can easily understand. For instance, this might mean including a page about "How to Schedule an Appointment," which lists the methods allowed.

Recommendation 2: Usability Test Websites

Finally, from a usability standpoint, this article would be remiss not to make usability testing a writing center's website with its target audience the second recommendation of this study. Writing centers want to ensure that their websites are accessible for students and easy to use. Rarely do students volunteer their opinions on a center's website; this information must be sought out. While extensive testing may be beyond the means of a writing center, testing a website with five to eight members of the target audience will give a representative sample from which to draw conclusions on how the website might be designed to meet audience needs (Nielsen and Landauer). This testing would reveal, for instance, whether students understand the information the center provides online (such as the methods to schedule an appointment).

Future Research

In addition to ease of use, usability also deals with visual design. On the page or screen, good organizational and visual design enhances navigation to make documents more useful (Jackson). Aesthetics is also important to a document—we must, for instance, persuade readers to read documents (see Redish, "Understanding Readers"). Like this, people must be persuaded to use websites (particularly for using websites for specific functions, like scheduling writing center sessions). Aesthetics is subjective,

however, and provides an avenue for future research: does the attractiveness of writing center websites affect their use by students? Though beyond the scope of this study, it is likely that an aesthetically-pleasing web presence may better attract students to writing centers. In order to gauge the effect websites have on the student audience in the meantime, writing centers can ask for feedback.

Conclusion

Writing centers need to focus on identifying with students in the online environment. Designing their websites for usability principles and identification helps to attract students, retain them, and teach them. Giving students options (such as scheduling in multiple ways and getting tutoring in more than one format) helps centers to be approachable and comfortable, and one of the aims of writing centers is generally to be comfortable for new student users (McKinney). Ultimately, giving students these choices helps them to be more confident, which can aid a collaborative situation in which a tutor is trying to help a student take responsibility for improving her writing.

Above all, writing centers should address the needs of their students. According to Greene, "a writing center that addresses the diverse needs of a broad range of students, as well as the competing epistemologies of a faculty, must by its very nature be designed to be flexible enough to serve the needs of its constituents" (32-33). When students are given choices, they may be more secure about the session in total—they have a sense of control, even if they feel they are inexperienced writers. In turn, they may be less likely to tell the tutor to "fix" their paper. Making choices of scheduling and types of tutoring available makes centers more able to meet student needs because more students will be able to identify with the center. Designing writing center websites for identification will hopefully build and sustain student connections to keep students coming back to centers and improving as writers throughout the semester and their college careers.

Notes

[1] http://writingcenters.org/resources/writing-centers-online/ [accessed May 31, 2011]

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