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Review: *The Online Writing Conference:  
A Guide for Teachers and Tutors*

Beth L. Hewett

Portsmouth, NH: Boyton/Cook, 2010

by Jackie Grutsch McKinney and Emily J. Standridge

**About the Authors**

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For many writing center administrators, finding Beth Hewett's new book, *The Online Writing Conference: A Guide for Teachers and Tutors*, might seem like a small murmur of hope in the relative quiet that has consumed online tutoring scholarship over the past decade. The 1990s was a boom era for OWL scholarship with the publication of *Wiring the Writing Center* (Hobson), *Electronic Writing Centers* (Coogan), a special edition of *Computers and Composition* on online tutoring (Hult and Kinhead), and *Taking Flight with OWLs* (Inman and Sewall), which followed in 2000. But the last ten years have not been as dynamic. Despite the increase in centers offering online

tutoring, there has been a decrease in the scholarship on online tutoring. As such, writing center administrators want thoughtful, current, practical, and theoretically sound materials for advising tutors.

Hewett's book certainly fills some of the void. *The Online Writing Conference* is an exceedingly practical guide for teachers and tutors working online with students on their writing. She calls this type of work "online writing instruction" (OWI), addressing both synchronous and asynchronous text-based OWI only because, she claims, "the text-based nature of most OWI interactions [has been] ignored in favor of less readily accessible audio-visual approaches that attempt to approximate traditional oral face-to-face, one-to-one interactions" (xv).

The book is organized into eight chapters; the first four deal with issues that need to be addressed before online conferencing can begin. She starts by defining online conferences and discussing reasons to conduct conferences online. Hewett then delves into the characteristics of online conferences while exploring some of the different platforms available for them. Her discussion includes the importance of and methods for creating a positive and productive online environment. In chapter four, "Theories for Writing Response in Online Settings," Hewett forwards the importance of grounding OWI practice in theory; she suggests an "eclectic approach" to online interactions that draws from other composition theories.

The remaining four chapters are about giving students feedback. Hewett dispenses advice on issues such as vocabulary choice, outcomes, and mini-lesson plans. This advice is then complicated through a discussion of the pitfalls of text-only communication. Hewett advises the use of direct commentary in all online instruction. She finishes the main chapters with a concern for ways of evaluating OWI experiences in order to improve the practice. Her advice is to look for changes in student drafts as a marker of success. She also advocates considering how rubrics, surveys, and student comments could help in evaluations. Hewett closes her text with a postscript entitled "Toward a Theory of Conference-Based Instruction" that again argues for the use of an "eclectic" approach to online writing instruction and encourages more research into the area.

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Where this guide excels is in the many examples from online writing conferences as well as concrete suggestions (in bulleted lists) and conferencing action plans (in gray text boxes) for translating the ideas at hand into practice. For example, in chapter seven where she discusses engaging students online, Hewitt suggests we should:

- use students' names and speak to them directly
- refer to the writing frequently
- ask open-ended and genuine questions
- ask students for their questions
- require students to commit ideas to writing
- check for understanding
- offer critical responses
- be personable and genuine
- believe that the student is interested. (122-24)

The conferencing action plan for engagement offers five steps to improve one's OWI, including practicing IM with colleagues and reading up on IM in the professional literature (125). Writing center administrators wanting a way to break down online tutoring into teachable bites will likely find Hewett's topics helpful towards this end. Further, the guide never condescends but is appropriate for even beginning teachers and tutors.

However straightforward the advice, we do have some reservations about adopting the guide outright. For one, the case Hewett makes for what she calls an "eclectic" approach to writing instruction, which includes the practices of "modeling writing and revision, consistently using targeted mini-lessons that require student action, and listing next steps that explicitly guide students toward future drafts" (xx), gives us pause. Though this approach would seem, in name, to encourage drawing from various pedagogical approaches or theories, Hewett repeatedly promotes one approach: direct intervention in students' writings. In fact, within about six pages, Hewett considers

and dismisses three of the dominant ideas in contemporary composition theory (expressivism, social constructionism, and post-process theory) as “noninterventionalist pedagogies” (72-77). She writes,

I think that noninterventionalism, appropriation without collaboration, and a belief that process is not teachable have become such pet theories and that they have engendered damaging, noninterventionalist pedagogies often without sufficient study of their actual effects on students and their writing. (102)

Though she might well be right about the lack of research, each of these theories is defined by Hewett so narrowly—in essence by naming a practice that *might* emerge from them—she effectively makes a straw-man argument.

Hewett’s calling her approach “eclectic” is further rhetorical bluffing. What she outlines as “direct intervention” or “eclectic” to our ears sounds pretty similar to a current-traditional approach. As Maxine Hairston describes it, the current-traditional paradigm “posits an unchanging reality which is independent of the writer and which all writers are expected to describe in the same ways regardless of the rhetorical situation” and is “a prescriptive and orderly view of a creative act, a view that defines the successful writer as one who can systematically produce a 500-word theme of five paragraphs, each with a topic sentence” (441). Hewett’s approach fits within this paradigm as she assumes that the instructor or tutor is a knower of known, accepted rules that can be transmitted to the student unproblematically and that the student will improve his or her writing if told exactly what to fix; making those changes is the mark of a successful student writer. Hewett, in fact, takes issue with instructors giving indirect suggestions or asking questions when they should just tell students what to do. This presumes that instructors know what students should do—that, indeed, writing always has right answers regardless of contexts or intentions—and they are just being obtuse in the guise of minimalist tutoring.

We are also concerned with the looseness of her definition of “conference.” She conflates everything from answering student emails to spontaneous synchronous IM chats to long asynchronous

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writing center sessions under this term and suggests basically the same approach for each. While we agree that writing feedback can and should take different forms, the mode of interaction (email, IM, document exchange) and the participants in the interaction (tutor, student, teacher) make these interactions fundamentally different. Much of the advice seems more appropriate for teacher-student than for tutor-student interactions. For instance, she recommends adopting a “conferencing tone” in all interactions; “a conferencing tone is one of educational *authority*, whereby the online instructor owns *expertise* but allows for the student to develop his or her voice and message individually” (63, emphasis ours). Though we can see how this tone could work for teachers writing to their students, we imagine tutors might find it difficult to assume expertise and authority that they might not have.

In addition, the length of the commentary she models, in asynchronous conferencing particularly, might be daunting for tutors to accomplish in their limited time and lack of expertise in the assignment given. She suggests giving students embedded commentary, global comments, and a mini-lesson. In sample feedback, the global response exceeded five hundred words (19-20), and a mini-lesson spanned over four hundred words (95-96). A teacher would have first-hand knowledge of the assignment to justify this amount of commentary, but we are not convinced that tutors, who work with students in a variety of disciplines, would have this much to say. Granted, she begins with the acknowledgment that teachers and tutors have different responsibilities when working with students: “a course teacher has the authoritative responsibility to structure a course, develop assignments and assess students writing for grades, while a tutor’s job is to listen, read, and provide formative feedback uninvolved in grading” (8). But she argues that the jobs “naturally intersect” because “the role of an online teacher/tutor involves *both* critical feedback *and* interventional teaching—*both* supportive *and* critical instructional commentary” (9). We agree that teachers and tutors both give these kinds of commentary; the difference between tutoring and teaching, however, might make some of the advice more suited for one of these than the other.

There are other red flags we could point out here: how little

Hewett engages key writing center research by others on online tutoring, how quickly she dismisses audio-video tutoring as expensive and rare despite the wide employment of this mode in writing centers through free programs like Skype, how the social and political aspects of tutoring are almost entirely side-stepped, and how technology is accepted as a value-free tool in this book. As a guide for those entering the waters of online tutoring, *The Online Writing Conference* is a welcome addition. Michael Pemberton states in the foreword that Hewett addresses many of his fears and concerns as a beginner (xi). She does make OWI seem doable. Our remaining worry, actually, is that Hewitt's guide makes online tutoring seem a bit too easy and too straightforward by not addressing the underlying messiness of it all. For us, tutoring is more art than science, and we like to see that reflected in tutor training materials.

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