

# Changing the Landscape of Writing Centers in the Two-Year College through Online Discussion Boards

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Over 2,300 years ago many scholars in ancient Greece were skeptical of an emerging written discourse that challenged the conventional ways of communicating. In many ways, our current times are similar to ancient Greece in that linear and fixed discourses are changing as a result of an emerging and evolving digital revolution that has forced us to re-evaluate and redefine what constitutes written academic discourse. This change is also challenging the way we define, create, and modify writing centers. Most community college writing centers currently emphasize face-to-face, one-on-one interaction between students or between students and faculty. However, due to monumental changes in electronic technologies, we welcome a changing landscape in terms of what constitutes writing centers at the two-year college level.

The purpose of our study is to show how the four of us instructors at Century Community and Technical College—Brian Lewis, Gordon Pueschner, Kim Gaffney, and Chris Weyandt—began to recognize this changing landscape through

our work in our college's Online Writing Center (hence OWC). When we first created the OWC in 2005, we did not know what types of discourse students would embrace and what types they would reject. Little did we know, however, that the students would most value discussion boards in their OWC interactions. Through this student response, we came to learn the importance of student community-building in an OWC environment.

## Literature Review

According to Howell, Williams, and Lindsay, "The current higher education infrastructure cannot accommodate the growing college-aged population and enrollments, making more distance education programs necessary." Colleges need to prepare for more students because "the largest high school class in U.S. history will occur in 2009" (Howell, Williams, and Lindsay). This statistic reflects a burgeoning trend in how our students will be learning in the future. Most research on online communities portrays both asynchronous communities, such as discussion boards, and synchronous communities, such as chat rooms, as vital aspects of community building in any online teaching or tutoring environments (Ko and Rossen 51-52; Palloff and Pratt; Conrad and Donaldson 20-23). This research largely shows both synchronous and asynchronous communities as equally successful means of providing a sense of "social presence" in online learning environments (Swan and Shih).

Most particularly relevant to our own interests, online communities have proven to be particularly helpful to faculty and students in the community college setting. As Clinton Gardner asserts, OWLS can be extremely useful in creating a sense of community and collaboration among faculty and students: "Students can collaborate in a nontutorial, nonteacherly setting with readers who are their *respondents* rather than their *instructors*" (77). Finally, both types of online community appear to reinforce the CCCC policy on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments: "Good Practice Encourages Contacts Between Student and Faculty . . . Good Practice Develops Reciprocity and Cooperation among Students

...” (Chickering and Ehrmann).

However, our study is unique in that it suggests that discussion board environments might help facilitate student learning even more than synchronous chat rooms do. As Hiltz and Goldman indicate, discussion board work has the advantage of creating for students a “learning network” among their peers, leading to community building among all online writers involved. Even after pointing out several advantages of synchronous online communication for student learning, Conrad and Donaldson concede that “Unlike synchronous activities, asynchronous activities allow each voice to be heard, whether in a small or large group, helping learners feel that they are part of a learning community and increasing their motivation to interact” (22).

Furthermore, unlike most research on the role of discussion boards in online learning, our study focuses on the role that online writing centers may play in facilitating this community-building process. Most scholarship on online writing centers has examined such issues as e-mail tutoring, student-faculty synchronous conferences, and responding appropriately to student writing online (Ascuena and Kiernan, Hobson, Gardner). However, such scholarship either does not directly address the role of the discussion board in an online writing center or argues against its usefulness in a writing center.

Indeed, in his introduction to *Wiring the Writing Center*, Eric Hobson cautions readers not to make too much out of emerging technologies such as discussion boards because they do not “provide a writing center with anything that can replace the people who work there” (xi). Of a similar mindset, Ellen Mohr proclaims, “Students do not use our writing center computers to type their papers” and “Computers will never replace tutors” (152-53). Contrary to these assertions, our work in this study indicates that online writing center scholarship needs to re-examine preexisting prejudices against OWCs and asynchronous discussion.

## Background on Our Online Writing Center

Initially, during the 2004-2005 academic year, administrators

and English faculty at Century asked the coordinators of the OWC to develop research links for the Writing Center website. The OWC continued its development from 2005-06 with the introduction of online peer reviews and student-instructor “chats.” For the 2006-07 academic year, students could self-register for the OWC through Desire2Learn (D2L), our course management software here at Century. Once this occurred, student use of the OWC began to triple with each semester.

As it stands today in 2009, Century College is unusual among two-year and four-year institutions. Students enrolled in most four-credit sections of developmental writing and Composition I courses are required to spend one credit hour out of the four in the college writing center. Burgeoning enrollments at Century College over the past decade necessitated the development of additional ways for the 1,000 students in writing classes each semester to reach that 750 minute goal per semester. A lack of space in our on-site lab, combined with emerging technologies, made it possible to replicate the same quality of interactions in an online writing space. During the 2007-08 academic year, the OWC allowed students to earn credit toward their writing center goal in three ways: through the satisfactory completion of writing-related instructional materials, faculty-student conferences, and asynchronous discussion boards. Currently, students may earn 250 of the required 750 minutes credit through the OWC.

Faculty-generated instructional materials currently take several forms: grammar lessons, research techniques, common book information, assignments, quizzes, and sample papers. The flexible format allows both content and assignments to expand over time. The OWC oversight committee regularly reviews both the instructional materials on offer and the possible credit for completing the activities.

The conferencing feature used for faculty-student conferences in Century’s OWC does not have screen-sharing capability nor does it have voice capability. Instead, it is a synchronous version of the asynchronous discussion used for student-to-student interaction. Students contact the OWC coordinator with a request for a meeting. Once the meeting has been established,

students can either post their drafts and questions to a drop box in the OWC or email it to the instructor. At the designated date and time, both meet in the OWC conference room designated for this purpose. Not surprisingly, some of the more common topics of discussion in the conferences center on grammar, rhetorical mode, thesis, organization, MLA style and essay structure. Questions asked of the students tend to be open-ended, forcing them to analyze what is on the page and not simply do what they are told. In this way, they replicate the conversations we have in our on-the-ground writing center. The level of interaction stays the same, yet we are able to respond to students' needs regarding flexibility of scheduling.

Discussion boards, our third option for students, are by far the most popular and have grown every semester. Topics currently available to students are the campus' common book, grammar questions, peer review, environmental consciousness, and online learning. There is also a weekly topic to keep students engaged in the discussion boards over the course of the semester.

For the most part, faculty take a hands-off approach to the boards. Aside from establishing the discussion topics, faculty rarely intervene unless the conversation turns uncivil or a topic wanders too far off course. Fortunately, this happens rarely. The asynchronous discussions are otherwise entirely student-led. Because of the way the software is programmed in the discussion area, students will see the entire conversation thread in a post, making it easy for them to join in the conversation without necessarily having to go back and read every post in that thread. As with the instructional materials, every effort is made to keep the discussion boards accessible to the maximum number of students regardless of prior technology experience. To this end, through May 2008, we have been able to get 1,090 students and faculty self-registered for the OWC.

## Methodology

At the conclusion of both the 2006-07 and 2007-08 academic years, we decided to survey users of the Online Writing Center on its effectiveness. We were curious about what writing center

users liked best or least about the Online Writing Center. One of the questions on the survey (in both years) read as follows: "Which of the following is the most interesting or helpful aspect of the Online Writing Center?" Another question (again, in both years) asked, "What would you like to see more of in the Online Writing Center?"

In addition to the formal surveys, we wanted to learn about student use of both debate forums and asynchronous online peer review in the discussion boards. In the "Debate" Discussion Forums, students were instructed as follows:

Debate: Where do you stand and why?

Share your ideas and get feedback in this forum. Please avoid logical fallacies when supporting your position and stick with facts—information that can be verified—and inferences—conclusions about the unknown based on the known.

As with the "Debates," in the "Peer Review" Discussion Forum, we also tried to give students some specific guidelines for communicating in the forum:

Students may peer review their work here electronically. Be sure to attach (at least part of) your essay and major questions you have about it . . . If you are posting a piece of writing in response to a specific assignment, please include the assignment or a brief description of the assignment to better help your reviewer comment on the effectiveness of your work.

## Results: The Year-End Surveys

In the 2006-07 survey, most of the respondents (42.86%) indicated that the Discussion Boards were the most interesting or helpful aspect of the Online Writing Center, but only 9.52% of the respondents indicated that the Chat Rooms were most helpful to them. In other words, the students saw the Discussion Boards as being almost FIVE TIMES as helpful to them as the Chat Room sessions. In the comment section of the survey, students described the Discussion Boards as "user friendly,"

“self explanatory,” “easy to use,” and “simple.” The comments on the Chat Rooms, by contrast, were quite sparse, and focused instead on how the Chat was difficult to manipulate. For example, one anonymous student wrote, “I would like to know how to get the chat sessions to work.”

The results of the 2007-08 survey indicated an increased popularity of the Discussion Boards. A huge majority of the students picked “discussion boards” as the aspect of the Online Writing Center that was “most helpful/interesting” to them (54.17%). And this time NONE of the students surveyed picked “conference appointments with tutors” (our new name for the Chat Room sessions) as “most helpful/interesting.” One student wrote, “I think that the discussions are great to read and to know that I’m not the only one with questions that I feel are ‘silly’ or ‘stupid.’” Another remarked, “[due to the Discussion Boards] You can ask questions and don’t have to try to find the answer or even after you’ve searched. Someone will respond.”

The student respondents to both surveys also indicated that they were interested in more engaging technology in the Online Writing Center. Question four on the 2008 survey read, “Which of the following options would get you more interested in using the Online Writing Center?” The most popular response both years (52.4% of the students in 2006-07; 39.39% of the students in 2007-08) was “if it had more engaging technology.” The key to this response is “engaging.” We have chosen to interpret this to mean short, to-the-point, campus-specific, and hopefully slightly humorous. In other words, something that one might consider engaging with more than once. It is also worthy to note that the second most popular response to Question four in 2007-08 was “if it had more discussion boards” (27.27%).

## Common Uses of the Online Writing Center Discussion Board

### Debates on Current Events

Three of the most popular discussion boards were on political topics: The War in Iraq, Global Warming, and the 2008 Presidential Election. Within these online debates, students

voluntarily engaged each other. Interestingly enough, even those students who were not required to come to the Writing Center for credit willingly joined in the debates. Furthermore, the students, did, for the most part, employ logical reasoning to make their points. Our initial fear was that the students would make *ad hominem* attacks (e.g., “Hilary is a bitch!”), but by and large they did not engage in this sort of rhetoric, nor did they permit others to do so. When they did make personal remarks, others within the Discussion Board discourse community would often point out their breaches of netiquette, enabling the initially rude individual to “back off” his or her words a bit. On the whole, we noticed that students were able to use our Online Writing Center--voluntarily--to express their concerns about political, social, and cultural issues.

### Peer Review

The results for peer review tended to be mixed. We asked students to post three questions that they had about their own work. Furthermore, we stressed that these questions concern issues of content and organization rather than grammar and format. Unfortunately, we noticed that many students neglected to post any questions along with their work. When they did write questions, the questions tended to be vague, such as “Tell me what I should do or change?” or “Can you fix my paper for me?” Such questions mirror the types of queries that writing center tutors often receive from students who are inexperienced in talking about their own written work. In an online environment, we learned that students can respond to visual cues, such as bolding text: as soon as we began to bold the line about “major questions” in the directions for peer review, we started to get students asking more questions about their own work.

On a more positive note, we saw that students often went to great lengths to help each other out in online peer review. For instance, one student explained to another student that the definitions that he was using weren’t necessarily clear to a non-technical audience: “I personally don’t know what HSV and CMYK stand for. I would also suspect that some people don’t



know what RGB means. If your audience is a higher class where they would know these terms you wouldn't have to worry about defining these terms but if your audience is the common person then I would consider doing it."

## Discussion

Only a few students were taking advantage of faculty-student online conferences in the OWC. As another colleague has pointed out, "You can lead a student to the writing center but you can't make him (or her) think." When the OWC was originally established, we had envisioned that this would be one of the more heavily trafficked areas. Use has been consistent, but not at the levels we had hoped.

However, from the discussion boards we can reasonably infer that our students learned to grasp the socio-political nature of the writing process; engagement in the act of writing, after all, makes a writer a participant within a discourse community. Through their use of the online Discussion Board, the students became more aware that writing is a social, participatory, collaborative act, through which ideas are refined, tested, revised, and explored. Some of the survey comments indicated that students enjoyed being able to interact with others and saw a value in using an online writing center as a place for conversational feedback. For example, the student peer response noted above helps to illustrate the student's awareness of the social nature of the writing process on two different levels. To begin with, the student responder asks the student using the technical terms to consider adjusting his prose for his non-technical audience. The remark about "class" also shows that the student responder understands the notion of linguistic register and is trying to make the student aware of this as well.

Asynchronous discussion boards on current events engage our students in discussion on issues that matter to them, in an interactive setting that allows them time to produce meaningful, more insightful writing. A lot of students who are in the regular ground-based classroom may be too shy to speak up or they may not be able to think on the spot. In the discussion board, students

get a chance to really think about the topic in a more stress-free zone.

An asynchronous discussion board also helps promote a sense of community. Students often engage in social functions online, such as Facebook and Myspace, both of which enable community interaction. In the discussion room, students recognize each other after a while and get comfortable with each other. As a result, they begin to ask each other questions and share ideas without being worried about excessive judgment from their peers. The discussion board also provides students knowledge of the world. Discussion boards keep many students who don't follow news or politics up to date, and may in fact get them to investigate further or give them ideas to write about in their classes.

Most importantly, asynchronous discussion boards enable students to write. They have to write out their thoughts and opinions. When they agree or disagree with another student, they have to write it out. And the more practice the students have with the discussion boards, the better they become at writing. As Muriel Harris and Michael Pemberton claim, "Certainly, there are advantages to this sort of interaction. To begin with, to use the system [discussion boards], students must do the one thing we work hardest to get them to do: write" (158). In the online environment everything the student wants to say has to be written out. And in this environment without the pressures of the classroom with people staring at them, students can take their time, think it through, and figure out exactly what points they want to emphasize. Students also value asynchronous interaction because they can do it anytime they want. Many Century students are busy working full-time (working an average of 34 hours per week, according to 2007 Century College statistics) and many have families, so they don't have the time to get together and chat with friends about current events or topics that matter to them. The discussion boards allow students to still participate in a meaningful exchange of ideas on their own time.

Asynchronous discussion boards are also useful because instructors can't teach students everything in the classroom;

therefore, the online writing center becomes a place to reach students in new ways. In the classroom students might be at varying ability levels, and as instructors we don't have time to address the needs of all of them. We can therefore guide our students to the Online Writing Center where they can get help from other instructors and students. Harris and Pemberton claim that "[The online writing center] becomes a resource center for writers, providing opportunities to learn new tools for writing that may not be taught in course" (158). Instead of the student just having their instructor as their only main resource guide, the online writing center provides the student with another outlet for them to learn.

### Conclusion: Discussion Boards and Beyond

Clearly, students in our Online Writing Center value the discussion boards and see them as an important means of connecting with their peers. It is clear that they feel they learn more from the asynchronous responses of peers than from making tutoring appointments online with faculty members. Thus our study suggests that discussion boards in an online writing center may accomplish the following goals:

- (1) They may enable students to more firmly grasp the idea that writing is both social and political in nature;
- (2) They may help students produce more insightful student writing;
- (3) They may promote a sense of community akin to communities formed in other online spaces (such as MySpace and Facebook);
- (4) They may give students more writing practice; and
- (5) They may give students more freedom to write when they want.

Of course, our findings are somewhat tentative and need to be followed up by further research and study. We plan to continue to survey students on their OWC usage over the next three years to obtain more data on this topic. But, thus far, we feel we can recommend that other community colleges consider the value of setting up online writing centers at their schools through their

schools' own course management software. By doing so, we have found a novel way to facilitate student collaborations in a writing center environment, which, as Lunsford concedes, is often "impossible" to do in college and university writing centers due to their bureaucratic structures and emphasis on tutor-tutee relationships.

Through discussion boards, students learn to help each other with their writing regardless of their level or background; this demonstrates that, with discussion boards in Online Writing Centers, Elbow's "yogurt" model of writing (as explained in *Everyone Can Write*) may be applicable to online environments as well. If the online world is the world students inhabit, then it only makes sense for us to provide a good learning environment, a reliable one, in their virtual landscape.

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