Community Building in Online Writing Centers

Beth Godbee

Beth Godbee considers how OWLs promote equity and collaboration.

Being without power for over eight hours (and counting), I am acutely aware of the impact of technology upon my life. Aside from my general apprehensions about the loss of heat, the upcoming cold shower, and the possibility that my food may spoil, I miss my computer the most. Composing by hand is a task too unfamiliar to describe; yet, I find comfort in its possibilities. When all else fails, I can still write. With the simple tools of pen, paper, and sunlight, I settle down to record my thoughts. I know that writing by hand will endure because while computers provide one method for composition, they do not replace the practical process of handwriting.

Similarly, I do not worry that online writing environments will make writing centers obsolete. When we think of online tutorials, we must remember they are a related but separate entity from the face-to-face conferencing that characterizes writing center work. Certainly online tutorials can enhance and expand current writing center work, but only if we promote new tutoring practices that encourage composition, collaboration, and most importantly, community. The idea of online community resembles what M. Jimmie Killingsworth calls "global communities"–-networks of people stretching across time and space to locate writers with shared "special interests," or similar views. Online Writing Labs (OWLs) can create global communities by helping writers connect with one another to form networks of people. In an effort to promote online community building, this article describes community-centered reasons for establishing electronic writing environments and then proposes tutoring practices that may better facilitate online, or global, communities.

We must consider not only how and when to use technology but also why to use it. With reflective and critical use, we can ensure that computer conferencing promotes democratic means for education. Our goal, as with all tutoring practice, must be "to extend privilege to communication over isolation, collaboration over competition, and change over tradition" (Selfe 120). We can extend privilege by using online tutorials to promote equity, blur the lines between producers and consumers of text, encourage the social nature of composition, and decentralize writing centers. Online writing environments may provide for more equitable education as they allow a diverse student population to access their services and give voice to students who are traditionally marginalized or silenced in class discussions.

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If OWLs increase student access (Selfe), participation (Lanham), collaboration (Hobson), and diversity (Flores), then they may provide opportunities for more egalitarian

educational practices. Increased access and equity lead to a broader community of involved participants who speak online even as they are silenced elsewhere. By "filtering out the customary clues of social and sexual hierarchy" (Lanham xiv), electronic spaces can allow for more balanced contributions by all students, especially those ignored because of race, class, gender, or other identity markers. Online environments, therefore, allow marginalized groups the opportunity to make cultural and intellectual contributions to their writing communities, contributions that require dominant groups to think more broadly and inclusively.

While promoting equity, online writing environments might also minimize the difference between producers and consumers of text. By inviting more people to write and then critique online texts, "computers may help us broaden our notions of authorship, readership, and interpretation" (Selfe 122). The online composition process, then, makes the text mutable, invites change, and allows writing to be shaped by readers and writers alike (Selfe 128; Handa 128-129). In comparison to readers of traditional documents, readers of electronic text feel more deeply connected with the writing because it is changing and changeable.

Also, in contradiction to the Romantic idea of the solitary writer composing alone, electronic writing environments acknowledge the way students learn from and write with one another as well as with and against other texts. The goal of online tutorials, then, resembles the goal of broader neighborhood communities: opportunity for members (writers or citizens) to form networks for collaborative work. As writers work together to produce socially constructed texts, they engage in conversation and make meaning together. Perhaps this has always been the intention of academic research and writing. Peter Carino looks into the Latin roots of the word "citation" and finds "city" and "citizen" at the center of what we do (191). Composition efforts that allow students to cite each other's ideas further the notion of community that is evoked in the academic language we use still today.

As writing centers move online, they become "places without walls" that allow conferencing and conversation about writing to occur anywhere and anytime writing actually takes place (Gardner 75). Historically, the issue of physical space–-where the writing center is located on campus-–has created much debate. These debates continue over whether the center should have one location or many, how the physical space should be arranged , and how environments can be made more conducive to composition and community (Healy 542; Burmester). OWLs help writing centers move beyond a single sense of location and "makes the 'Your place or mine?' question obsolete" (Healy 544).

Simultaneously, by decentralizing writing centers, we acknowledge students' multiple community memberships. We recognize that many students are also concerned with paying taxes, working full-time, supporting their families, and participating in neighborhood or work communities (Gardner 75). Online tutoring extends academic services to populations otherwise disenfranchised by traditional locations and times of operation.

Computer conferencing has the potential to be open-ended and student-centered. We, therefore, must envision formats for online conferencing that will allow every student a voice to engage in dialogue with others. Flexibility and adaptability, which are fundamental to writing center work, should allow us to conceive of new conferencing arrangements; learning should be constructed "one-on-one, group-to-group, and case-by-case" (Cummins 203).

With that said, it is not enough to replicate conference structures from face-to-face tutorials. Writers cannot simply ask questions and wait at their computer terminals for tutors to give directions. Synchronous chat systems, which are interactive and real-time, allow "students and tutors [to] converse electronically, view a draft onscreen, and/or share files and references with one another as they collaborate" (Harris and Pemberton 532). It makes sense for conferencing to happen synchronously. Yet, we must design methods for students and tutors to view drafts and make collaborative modifications. We must move away from the current model that limits interactions to one writer and one tutor.

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Irene Clark offers new ways to think about collaborative online tutoring when she considers how tutors can assume active roles in helping students identify and interact with quality electronic resources. By functioning as larger workshops or small-group sessions, online conferences help students learn keyboarding, research skills, and database navigation. OWLs can provide students the opportunity to "navigate various information sources" with multiple tutors and writers evaluating sources and proposing ideas synchronously (Clark 566). Tutors and students can meet in libraries, collaborate on Internet searches, and mutually learn from the research process. Online conferencing should allow groups of students to huddle around computer terminals, talking about ideas as they type out responses. Likewise, groups of tutors might work together as they electronically interact with students.

It is easier to envision how communities of online writers form when we conceive of online conferencing as larger groups working together. Chat rooms facilitate multiple, simultaneous conversations about writing. Tutors and students remain anonymous to blur the distinction of tutors providing knowledge and students asking the questions. All members of the online writing community engage in dialogue and make suggestions. Writers could develop new texts collaboratively and then cite these electronic texts in their papers. Perhaps electronic composition will even change the types of assignments teachers currently assign. We could move toward composition that is more collaboratively and socially constructed and that will likely challenge the status quo.

Just as people fear that computers will replace handwritten text, tutors and directors worry that technology will threaten the community we seek to develop in writing centers. Electronic resources can, however, help to create community among writing center folk in the same way that we can create new and more equitable communities among writers in our colleges and universities. Activities such as posting to the Wcenter listserv,

attending online conferences, and chatting on MOOs with other tutors and directors increase the interconnectedness among people who work in writing centers (Inman and Sewell xxvii).

Moreover, the various electronic forums for discussing and composing text accomplish the basic goal of tutoring--engaging with writers in their process (i.e., we must write to talk online). To make online tutoring effective, we should develop new practices that match the environment and context of conferencing. Creating group tutorials and space for collaborative writing is the beginning of work in this direction, so that we can continue to network our OWLs in ways that promote community building.

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