THE ONLINE WRITING CENTER: REACHING OUT TO STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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The case for online Writing Center services has been built upon arguments of geographical needs, cost effectiveness, and overall time efficiency. A largely overlooked population who would benefit from these online services is that of students with disabilities. Stephanie Kerschbaum comments on this overlooked population in her text on multimodality stating, "Far too often, disability is an afterthought rather than considered at the incipient design of the digital text." The case for Online Writing Centers is no different. As centers grapple with which programs to use and how to train tutors to work in this environment, they overlook the use of online tutoring for students with disabilities. In exploring how this interface can preserve identity and promote accessibility, Writing Centers can create a greater outreach to a diverse student body.

As a whole, Online Writing Instruction is undergoing what *Kairos* calls a "retrofit." A series of recent studies presented by this publication in *Multimodality in Motion* has found that instructors naturally create teaching strategies "privileging" those students who can be present in class, over those who have to participate in other ways (Selfe). In the online classroom this translates to a priority of attention being given to students who can immediately submit a response, compared to those students who must find alternative ways to respond such as fingering through a braille keyboard. The one-on-one atmosphere of the Writing Center can immediately confront this tendency to unwittingly privilege any one student over another with the intimacy created through rapport in every session.

Whether online or in person, sessions begin with rapport being built between the student and peer tutor. Rapport fosters an environment built on trust where the student feels comfortable admitting to their struggles as a writer. In the University of Southern California's Online Writing Center, students are required to fill out a questionnaire for tutors to get to know them by prior to the actual session (Anderson 78). This introductory survey assesses how student writers feel about themselves without being too invasive or forcing the participant to discuss any information that may be uncomfortable for them to discuss. It inquires about students' feelings towards writing, what their assignment goals are, and what steps they have already taken to get help. This simple precursor could allow students with disabilities to express their concerns as a writer and a student in need of specific modifications, but only to the extents that they are comfortable with. If the student wanted to, they could entirely omit any information pertaining to their disability. Thus, the student is given the chance to create and control their online identity.

The idea of this online persona translates to any student type, where the student might be apprehensive to seek help in person. Students with disabilities may have apprehension rooted in the physical nature of their session, where accommodations may feel time consuming or inconvenient. OWI researchers Oswal and Meloncon have found that between 60-80% of students with disabilities wish to conceal their disability altogether (283). What effect this has on personhood is indefinable, but there is empowerment present when students are able to control the perceptions that others have of them. Additionally the accessibility of online tutoring can bring the Writing Center to the student, who may otherwise have difficulties physically commuting to campus. In allowing students to have the option of scheduling an online appointment, the Writing Center creates a safe space for learning.

Issues have manifested themselves in the past when students with disabilities have obtained their education online. Teachers may not consider modifying what seems to be an already accessible technology, to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities. Oswal and Meloncon found in their research that many professors "had no desire" to change their current online course structure to meet the specific needs of students (279). Further, because the screen can be a barrier rather than a "window" professors may not even know that their students have disabilities (Turrentine and MacDonald 6). The argument against a more supportive online classroom could go on indefinitely based on low teacher compensation and the copious hours put into lesson planning. Regardless of this debate, in translating the

problem of modifying the online classroom to the Online Writing Center, the issue is quickly resolved.

The Writing Center is in a prime position to address the one-on-one concerns that the typical learning environment cannot. Tutors have the ability to tailor their strategies to meet the needs of students on the spot. The University of Wisconsin at Madison has recently documented an experimental session in their Writing Center whereby two tutors were part of an online, synchronous, webcam based session. The tutors noted that as they observed successful techniques in the other tutor's style, they were able to immediately adopt that technique into their own tutoring persona (Misemer). This same situationally adaptive technique is used when a single tutor works with a student. In the online environment the tutor is able to note where and how the student responds. This response may be via email, embedded in the assignment document, or in a shared document space. The ability to adapt to specific student needs instantaneously is a luxury, common in the Writing Center space, but not afforded in the typical classroom environment. For students with disabilities, such an easily adapted educational strategy is a necessity. Writing Centers should use this educational superpower as a means of reaching out specifically to students who have a difficult time in the physical classroom because of their disability. Not only is the session itself more easily accessible in this online space, but the content can be the focus of the session as modifications can be made in a timely manner.

In the physical classroom environment, students may experience a power struggle where they are told *how* to learn rather than *empowered* as learners. In the online platform the tutor becomes "a learning guide," instead of taking on the "lecturer" role (Packham et al. 243). As a learning guide, the tutor can empower the student to take control of their own writing. For students with disabilities, this sense of control is often robbed from them. Certain impairments might make them dependent on the aid of another person or assistive technology. But as soon as the student logs in to their Writing Center appointment online, they are elevated to the status of being a writer. With that, control is given back to the student in the form of their authorship.

The learner autonomy fostered in physical Writing Center appointments is exponentially multiplied online where the tutor can link to online references and cover more textual ground than in a face-to-face session. This supports the crux of academic support where Writing Centers "help students to become better writers and not necessarily create better papers" (Thompson 128). For those students who have to allot time orchestrating travel and hiring physical aid to accommodate their disabilities, spending *extra* time to become a better writer may have never been an affordable goal. Finding ways to be physically present may be complicated enough.

As Writing Centers are beginning to recognize a growing need for online services and online training pedagogy, the time has presented itself to address how these online sessions can be used or further improved to meet the needs of students with disabilities. It has been estimated that around 19% of graduate and undergraduate students combined suffer from various disabilities (Oswal and Meloncon 272). With such a staggering number, education and educational tools, such as the Writing Center, must make themselves as accessible as possible. Writing Center pedagogy, in seeking to create autonomous student writers, already has the basic notions by which the needs of any student can be met virtually in the intimate nature of the one-on-one session. As we push forward for these services to become common practice, we must be cognizant of those with disabilities in order to preserve identity and promote independence.

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