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Do We Really Need That? Choosing Technology for the Writing Center

[Spring 2005 / Focus](#)

by Michele Eodice

Michele Eodice evaluates the pros and cons of wiring the writing center.



Michele Eodice

More and more, we have assumed roles of technological pioneers, discovering better ways to integrate writing, teaching, scholarship, *and* computing.

- Major Hugh Burns, Human Resources Laboratory, Lowry Air Force Base (1984)

The world I enter each day when I unlock my office door seems to be comprised about equally of three parts: face-to-face meetings with students and colleagues, an electronic community where I read and write in email and the World Wide Web, and the discursive world of academic texts disseminated through traditional print media. But the electronic meeting place and texts seem to be impinging more and more on the other realms.

- Alice Trupe, Writing Center Director and Director of Composition at Bridgewater College of Virginia (1997)

I think we are getting to a place in the proliferation of technologies in our writing centers where, not unlike that forty-four minute mark in a very intense writing consulting session, there is a need for reflection, for sitting back and looking around and determining what is working and why and what we should buy into and why.

What does *technology* mean to you? Is it simply a transparent tool, something

that you rely on for convenience, to use when needed and think about only when you want to cuss it out? The broad range of current technologies for writing centers--from PCs, to assistive software, to PDA downloads of FAQs on grammar, to ReadPlease [1], to a threaded discussion board for tutors, to virtual peer tutoring [2]--promises an equally wide range of fixes, problems, and unforeseen costs. I beg you not to be overwhelmed; my hope is to provide a problem-posing approach as you wend your way through a tangle of cables and spreadsheets.

What's your vision?

The editors of *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal* asked me to contribute something that would reflect my presentation at the **International Writing Centers Association 2004 Summer Institute**. Among the several workshops I was involved in as a leader, I led a discussion on new technologies for writing centers. I should say up front that I don't consider myself the most qualified of our writing center professionals in this area [3], nor do I take credit for introducing any particular "bleeding edge" technological device or practice at the Summer Institute. I simply asked a bunch of questions.

In the daily message to **WCenter** summing up our Summer Institute activities for those who could not be there, Janet Swenson reported on the breakout session. I offer her post here for you to try as an exercise at your writing center:

First, participants wrote in response to the following two prompts:

1. Name two things you would like your writing center to be able to do or do better in the next 5 years.
2. Identify the technologies that would be needed or would aid in reaching those two goals.

We shared responses to those prompts in small groups. Michele suggested that in order to avoid adopting new technologies simply because they are available, we ask ourselves these questions: (1) Is learning happening here? Does this new technology scaffold new learning? And/or (2) Does adopting this new technology allow me to show that I care? Michele also invited us to consider whether the use of technology is sustainable and whether it supports collaborations.

At what price?

As program administrators, many of us have to choose carefully how to spend down our budgets. I offer the following questions to help determine the best solutions for your context. Thinking about "cost" in the broadest sense is not leaving out the human element; to the contrary, the cost of any service, whether virtual, outsourced, or face-to-face (f2f), should be set next to the return on investment in our students. For example, deciding to buy four laptops for your writing center rather than seven desktop PCs might *cost* the same when you get the invoice, but your choice might be (as it is for me) based on which option might make the environment work better for students, promote multiple uses, support multiple locations, improve aesthetics, and address space concerns.

Does this technology address or improve access? Does this program promote collaboration or contribute to an invasion of privacy? . . . Is learning happening?

In addition, we have a particular audience: Generation Y. These students come to us with expectations for faster, more effective connectivity in all areas of their lives: shopping, enrolling, chatting, and learning. Howard Rheingold, in his book *Smart Mobs*, reveals his amazement at the digital activity at one intersection in Tokyo: "I discovered that Shibuya Crossing was the most mobile phone-dense neighborhood in the world: 80 percent of the 1,500 people who traverse that madcap plaza at each light carry a mobile phone," text-messaging and talking with the connectivity we can only imagine as we sit plugged in at our desks. More and more schools are offering laptops to incoming freshmen. Currently at the University of Kansas (KU) we are piloting a response tool for students: holding a small PDA-like device, students answer questions in class by sending an infrared coded message to the instructor's computer, thereby allowing for immediate feedback and assessment of learning.

Some key questions, then, are the following: Does this technology address or improve access? Does this program promote collaboration or contribute to an invasion of privacy? And finally, the most important question to ask, perhaps, when assessing the technologies at work in your writing center is this: Is learning happening?

Kara Blond [4], at Stanford, challenges us to think about online writing labs (OWLs) in relation to our theories of how we teach and learn:

A theoretical perspective on OWLs must consider two angles. One, what pedagogical theories inform the effective teaching of writing? How have these changed as a result of technology? And then, two, how do those theories fit into those about communities of practice?

We consider our [KU Writing Center website](#) an OWL. Most writing centers, and most OWLs, ideally embrace some facet of all three of Andrea Lunsford's writing center models: the garret, the storehouse, and the collaborative or Burkean parlor environment. Our webpages include writing guides, the static handout of the storehouse writing center. We also include activities and routes for the individual writer to work through in her own time and space, as she would in a garret model. But the interactive element that promises a conversation with other writers, the Burkean parlor, is what online environments have the potential to do best and are, to date, most challenging to create effectively. While we don't MOO yet at KU, we do have an online consultation feature, e-consultation if you will, that offers feedback on texts up to twelve pages long within forty-eight hours. I welcome you to try it out: [KU Writing Center website](#).

Last year we conducted an assessment of the service, surveying about 150 users. A few things we learned from that assessment have stuck with me: students who were satisfied with the online service were equally likely to have worked with a student consultant f2f and been satisfied with that method as well. And second, the text memo students receive (we do not mark on papers; we do not even return the paper at all) is valued as an important artifact, allowing students the luxury of time to re-read and really think about revision based on the comments provided by our consultants. Nancy Byam, a communications researcher at KU, recently found similar results: while students

regarded online, f2f, and phone interactions as equally important for maintaining their social networking, the quality of Internet relationships was rated slightly lower than f2f encounters.[5]

The Just do it generation. Just because we can?

My friends and family think I am a gadget junkie. It is true: I am always grazing for the next new thing, but I often regret my purchases. You may be less enamored of gadgets--more skeptical, more in control of your shopping impulses. That is the healthy approach. Limited writing center budgets may actually keep us safe from feeding our appetite so uncritically. But even with a pot of money to spend, we should be wondering if we should do something or buy something *just because we can*.

We need to determine what bringing this shiny and new thing to student users *means* to their experiences in a writing center.

Programmer turned novelist, Ellen Ullman, tells of a CEO so excited by the potential of his new sophisticated networking system that he asks Ullman to set up computer surveillance on employees. He even wants the ability to count the keyboard strokes of one woman who had been with his company for 20 years and was a family friend. When Ullman asks why in the world he would want to do that, he answers plainly: "Because I can." [6]

We need to determine what bringing this shiny and new thing to student users *means* to their experiences in a writing center.

We purchased a Tablet PC [7] for our writing center recently, and after piloting several uses we found some aspects disappointing. We had predicted that after purchasing this first one we would run out and grab up a few more. But just this one might serve the purposes we have found it doing best. So, really cool stuff is really only as cool as its uses.

Whether you have techies around to design a custom program or need to outsource your tracking software with TutorTrac, the size of your program, the needs of your students (access, convenience, and enhanced learning opportunities), and the culture of assessment at your institution should point the way. The participants in the **2004 IWCA Summer Institute** represented a range of school types and comfort levels with technology. Many felt pressure from the administration to get on board; in order to take responsible action (which includes knowing what to say "no" to), they will want to get up to speed on the current technology for writing centers. Others had wishes bigger than their budgets. Janet Swenson, from Michigan State, is a great example of someone who has harnessed the talents of many people and the potential of technologies to develop online flash productions on special topics, such as *Analytical Writing in the Humanities*. [8]

I was an early adopter and remain a risk taker with technology, but I have also learned to be deliberate in my choices that determine the direction our writing center might take. Any writing center director today can find online examples, resources, important research findings, and friendly consultants among their professional colleagues. I urge you to take time to talk with your own staff and students and beyond in order to develop a vision of technology use for your writing center. And just one final thing: It really ain't about the size of your toys...and yes, *Dreamweaver* rules!

Notes

[1] **ReadPlease** is text-to-speech conversion software. The free download version can provide a “read back” for the individual student (especially helpful for those with visual impairments or reading challenges) or can be used in a tutorial session as an alternative to the typical reading aloud done by the student writer or tutor.

[2] I recommend *Virtual Peer Review: Teaching and Learning About Writing in Online Environments* by Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch (SUNY Press 2004).

If you have yet to launch an online tutorial service, consider looking at two very helpful articles in the **Praxis archives**: Beth Hewett, a former leader in SmartThinking, asks, “How Do You Feel? Attitudes About Online Tutoring” (spring 2004) and Zachary Dobbins, Heidi Juel, Sue Mendelsohn, Roger Rouland, and Eliana Shoenberg (spring 2004) have developed a helpful piece called “Training on the Edge: Centers Discover New Ways to Train Consultants,” which takes into account the question of how to orient our in-house writing consultants to online work.

[3] Like most things I get kudos for, I can’t take sole credit. I thank my own savvy staff and students and recommend you consult with those at your schools, and in our field, who are steeped in learning and teaching about and with technology. I can think of a few people off the top of my head you could contact: James Inman, Nick Carbone, Eric Crump, and Cindy Selfe.

[4] Kara Blond, “**Online Writing Labs: Conditions Ripe for Community**”.

[5] Baym, Nancy K., Yan Bing Shang and Mei-Chen Lin. “Social Interactions Across Media: Interpersonal Communication on the Internet, Telephone and Face-to-Face.” *New Media and Society*. 6.3 (2004) 299-318.

[6] See *Close to the Machine: Technophilia and Its Discontents* by Ellen Ullman (City Lights, San Francisco, 1997). and see an interview with Ullman at <http://archive.salon.com/21st/feature/1997/10/09interview.html>

[7] “The Tablet PC,” *Pen Computing Magazine* July 2001.
http://pencomputing.com/frames/tablet_pc.html.

[8] The Michigan State University Writing Center, in cooperation with the WIDE project, has developed an online module to help writers learn the dynamics of developing a thesis statement in the humanities: ***Getting Started: Analytical Writing in the Humanities***.

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