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[Consulting](#)
[Training](#)
[News & Announcements](#)

Archives

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[Home](#) » [Archives](#) » [Fall 2007 \(Volume 5 Issue 1\) - Diversity in the Writing Center](#)

Enhancing Diversity Initiatives through Technology: Writing Center Access from Dallas to Afghanistan

[Fall 2007 / Training](#)

by **Rusty Carpenter**, *University of Central Florida*

Increasing diversity in the writing center through online consulting

Diversity on Our Campus



Rusty Carpenter

The **University of Central Florida (UCF)** has an enrollment of about 47,000 students across an expansive main campus and a large regional campus system. We have a diverse student population with a variety of needs and expectations. Our campus includes centers dedicated to fostering cultural diversity, such as the **Barbara Ying Center for Multilingual Multicultural Studies**, “one of the only buildings in the United States to be dedicated to the instruction of English as a Second Language (ESL)” (Center for Multilingual Multicultural Studies). UCF has also embraced diversity by offering new-student orientations in languages other than English.

We often look at diversity in terms of race and ethnicity, and this is a good starting point. However, writing center practitioners must think more openly about diversity to include students with diverse needs—students with disabilities and students with obligations that take them away from the physical space of the university campus (place-bound students). Until recently, place-bound students, those who cannot visit the writing center during normal business hours in person, had little access to writing center services other than the resources on our **Web site**. These students include those who work during the day, those with children or families, commuters, students taking courses on a regional campus, and students with physical disabilities.

As writing center practitioners, we must not only consider diversity in terms of race and culture. We must also consider

diversity in terms of physical ability, proximity to resources, and accessibility.

Charged with serving a large and diverse student population, the Coordinator and Director began to reassess our writing center's role as a student service. We had an established face-to-face writing center, but we only offered consultations to students on our main campus.

Technology's Potential to Enhance Diversity

Virtual spaces are sites of diversity and can foster tightly intertwined writer communities that bridge writing resources and students. In addition to what can be accomplished by physical spaces that strive to enhance diversity on campus, like the Barbara Ying Center, the innovative use of technology can enhance diversity initiatives by allowing writing centers to offer services to students in virtual spaces. As writing center practitioners, we must not only consider diversity in terms of race and culture. We must also consider diversity in terms of physical ability, proximity to resources, and accessibility.

Our response to the increasingly diverse and decentralized nature of our university was to expand our services beyond the physical space of our writing center. At the beginning of the fall 2005 semester, we began a pilot program named "**KnightOWL**," our version of an Online Writing Lab (OWL), which includes both synchronous online and phone consultations as well as our existing (and comprehensive) Web site (University Writing Center Home). During KnightOWL's pilot stages, we worked solely with graduate thesis and dissertation writers, consulting approximately 50 students in the first semester. The following fall, we opened our KnightOWL consultations to the entire student population. We encouraged place-bound students to try these appointments as a substitute for face-to-face (f2f) consultations, if they were not able to make it to campus. We fostered diversity through KnightOWL, helping students with special needs and unique circumstances through technology. Writing center practitioners have noted the value of encouraging diversity through OWLs as well. Mark Shadle, for instance, says "[o]nline writing and tutoring have clearly begun to test how strong our desire is to define education as convenient or efficient. OWL materials available around the clock have changed the way we live and use our time" (14). Writing center services *should* be convenient and efficient for students to use. As writing center practitioners, our goal should be to provide non-traditional and special-needs students with access to writing center resources, including consultations, that match the services available to the traditional student living in a dorm near our office.

Now that KnightOWL is available across thousands of miles and many time zones, we not only promote a supportive and inviting face-to-face culture, but a lively virtual (or digital) culture as well.

In an interesting discussion of cross-cultural differences in the writing center, Muriel Harris writes, "Among the defining characteristics of writing centers is the commitment to each student as an individual, to helping that particular writer develop his or her composing skills" (96). KnightOWL is our commitment to diversifying the writing center. We offer diverse services for students with diverse needs. Allowing us to be more inclusive as a service, KnightOWL reaches out to a wide range of students beyond those living on campus. Although it is a relatively new concept on our campus, KnightOWL's reach has

already spanned the United States, allowing us to conduct consultations with working and relocated UCF students in Dallas and Michigan. Moreover, KnightOWL recently spread its wings to Afghanistan, giving a UCF student in the military access to writing center consultations via our synchronous online services. Two years ago, we had no idea that KnightOWL would have such a big impact on our writing center.

Diversity in a Digital Culture

Technological innovations have allowed us to build an inclusive writing center, one that encourages all students, regardless of place, space, or mobility, to access our services in one form or another. Our culture is increasingly a digital one. Even back in 1995, Nicholas Negroponte noticed that we were beginning to “interconnect ourselves,” claiming that we would soon “socialize in digital neighborhoods in which physical space [would] be irrelevant” (7). We continue to interconnect ourselves, and physical space *has* become less critical to our daily work in the writing center. Students schedule appointments online, download handouts from our Web site, watch virtual tours of our writing center, and now even have their consultations online or over the phone. Dave Healy writes:

As the online composition classroom has become more common on college and university campuses, student writers have become increasingly comfortable not only composing and revising but also sending, receiving, and responding to text electronically. . . . As writers have expanded their horizons and their repertoires, writing centers have looked for ways to meet the needs of a new kind of client— one no longer limited by the constraints of face-to-face conferencing. (183)

With KnightOWL, information is accessible to students immediately, without their making the trek to the writing center’s physical space, although most on-campus students still prefer face-to-face consultations. The increased accessibility that our digital culture offers allows us to reach out to students who would not typically be able to use our resources. Students with families and children, working professionals, commuters, physically challenged students, and students who rely on alternative modes of transportation may find it inconvenient to come to campus to visit the writing center. On the digitized college campus, students can access writing center consultations from any location, as long as they have Internet access and a computer.

Our students are culturally and racially diverse, but they are also linked, integrated, wired, and Internet savvy.

Through hypermedia, KnightOWL has helped us redefine the writing center’s identity. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin help us understand technology’s potential to redefine our lives, claiming that we “employ media as vehicles for defining both personal and cultural identity” (231). For writing centers, there’s a lot of truth to Bolter and Grusin’s statement. Now that KnightOWL is available across thousands of miles and many time zones, we not only promote a supportive and inviting face-to-face culture, but a lively virtual (or digital) culture as well. We are no longer relegated to referring off-campus students to our Web site if they’re out of reach; we can refer them to our KnightOWL consultations, an alternative for students with diverse needs.

Although most of us have our own perceptions and opinions about technology,

there is little question that it has had a positive impact on writing center work and will continue to do so. Technology, if used with great care and planning, has the ability to unite students. It helps us build diverse networks of people, networks of students.

There's No Such Thing as a "Typical" Student

It would be impossible for me to describe the "typical student" in a digital culture. Writing center practitioners cannot plan for the "typical" student either, for the "typical" student should include those with diverse needs. If we do, we're alienating students who would benefit from our services. Our students are culturally and racially diverse, but they are also linked, integrated, wired, and Internet savvy. Some of our students would rather use KnightOWL than come in face-to-face. In fact, some students with special needs *must* visit online or over the phone. These students motivate us to develop better technological systems and think of new and useful ways to build technology into our programs. In some ways, these students help shape the ways in which technologies are used in a "wired" writing center.

Technology has allowed us to build beyond four walls, fostering a culture where all students are welcome. Of course, we must meet the challenge that Judith Kilborn poses when she urges writing center practitioners to meet the growing needs of culturally diverse student populations. However, I pose another "challenge" to writing center practitioners: We must also reach out to the students who can't visit our physical spaces. Technology has allowed us to bridge gaps—to consider the students who bring their papers to the writing center on a weekly basis and also the students we never actually "see," those not on campus on a regular basis or living far away from the university community. It is only when we reach out to ALL of our students that we will be truly "diverse."

Since KnightOWL's inception, we have consulted UCF students from all over the U.S., working with writers who relocated for a variety of reasons, place-bound students, and students with physical disabilities. With this, our goal is to offer quality writing resources to a diverse group of students, and technology has allowed us to pursue this worthy goal.

Using Technology to Diversify the Writing Center

Technology can be a powerful diversifying tool. As you consider diversity in your own writing center, think about these suggestions:

- Integrate resources geared specifically toward non-traditional writers into your Web site.
- Explore options for synchronous online consultations for non-traditional and place-bound students.
- Consider using multiple lines for scheduled telephone consultations for non-traditional and place-bound students.
- Consider developing an online forum where students at your institution, regardless of location, can share information, questions, and ideas.
- Partner with the student disabilities services center on your campus to verify that your Web resources are compatible with assistive technologies.
- Advertise writing center consultations through campus diversity groups like the multicultural or multilingual center on your campus, especially on their Web sites if possible.

- Offer brief e-newsletters for students enrolled in ESL programs and other campus outreach services.

To a large extent, society and the academic community will determine the writing center's need for technology. From Dallas to Afghanistan, our virtual doors are always open. To address the needs of our diverse student population, we expanded our virtual space to one that is welcoming regardless of physical location. These virtual environments are inclusive and have helped us reach out to students we once overlooked.

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