Electronic Writing Center Work: Surveying New Terrain


Within the last two decades, the rapid developments in communication technology have been felt in all areas of composition studies. Ranging from uncritical enthusiasm to serious reservations—and taking in sophisticated critique and self-declared "academic fantasy" along the way—the reactions in these three books, published in consecutive years, suggest something of the varied responses to these developments among writing center professionals.

As the title suggests, *Taking Flight With OWLs* is on the optimistic end of the spectrum, its twenty chapters tending to stress the potential of new technologies. Unfortunately, the collection is disappointing on a number of levels. An important source of the problem seems to lie in the way the book has been conceptualized. There is no controlling definition of the online writing lab (OWL) or even the subtitle's phrase, "electronic writing center work." As a result, OWL may refer to a writing center that houses one or more computers (or is simply preparing to purchase them),

Joe Law is Associate Professor of English and Coordinator of Writing Across the Curriculum at Wright State University. His publications include books and articles on writing centers, writing across the curriculum, and Victorian literature.

*Composition Studies*, Volume 30, Number 1, Spring 2002
one with some sort of Web page, one in which tutors sit beside students seated at computers, one in which tutors and students interact asynchronously (generally via email), one in which tutors and students interact in real time in MOOs without any face-to-face contact, and so on. The “electronic writing center work” is equally nebulous, often coming down to what is done in the writers’ own writing centers. Moving from chapter to chapter, a reader (this one, at any rate) feels a greater sense of incoherence than of diversity, a feeling exacerbated by the brevity of the chapters.

On the whole, then, the collection fails to realize the editors’ announced intent: “to move beyond anecdotal evidence for implementing computer technology in writing centers, presenting carefully considered studies that theorize the move to computer technology and examine technology use in practice” (xix). Anecdote dominates many chapters, with unreflective reportage frequently doing duty for examination. A local context is usually supplied, but seldom is there an attempt to look beyond that. Although the chapters are arranged under five promising headings—“Toward a Definition and Context for Electronic Writing Center Work,” “Narratives of Experience,” “Asynchronous Electronic Tutoring,” “Synchronous Electronic Tutoring,” and “Looking to the Future”—the headings sometimes seem arbitrary. In the first section, whereas Mark Shadle’s survey of OWLs does indeed provide a sense of context, Andy Curtis and Tim Roskams’ report of a research study involving ESL writers seems to fit into none of the editors’ categories. Lady Falls Brown’s account of the writing center at Texas Tech University does trace the history of the term OWL, but it seems largely a narrative of experience.

Even when chapters fit more obviously into the organizational scheme, as in the “Asynchronous Electronic Tutoring” section, discussions display significant limitations. Two chapters within that section seem premature, drawing conclusions on the basis of a single semester’s experience (David A. Carlson and Eileen Apperson-Williams, “The Anxieties of Distance: Online Tutors Reflect” and Joanna Castner, “The Asynchronous, Online Tutoring Session: A Two-Way Stab in the Dark?”). In addition, the latter makes use of a very small sample (twenty-nine students). Within another section, Jennifer Jordan-Henley and Barry Maid’s account of setting up a collaborative project with participants in Tennessee and Arkansas seems premature in another sense—it is of great interest in identifying the unanticipated political complications from both members of the two academic institutions and from state legislators (both
schools are state funded) but frustrating in stopping with unresolved legislative questions that, presumably, were eventually resolved.

Nor is the editors’ intent to theorize the move to computer technology always realized, for several contributors have a somewhat superficial sense of the term. In “Theories before Practice(s),” for instance, Denise Weeks recounts the process of applying for grant money to obtain computers for a writing center and seems to equate theorizing with projecting needs: “[...] I challenge the assertion that practice always precedes theory in writing centers. Sometimes we theorize based on expected or hoped for outcomes and begin the hard work of establishing practices after we get the funding to proceed” (56). Randall L. Beebe and Mary J. Bonevelle make a similarly dubious distinction: “Our practice, therefore, has become to resist technology as a theory (as only potential and possibility) and harness it toward very practical ends” (48).

Other chapters are more rewarding. Among them is Joel English’s pursuit of several MOO-related questions: “What difference does it make to the students who regularly employ objects and emotions? Do those who practice manipulating the environment actually contribute more to conversation? Do they go into more depth in their discussions? In essence, does the authority over environment help students develop comfort, confidence, and learning online?” (174). His investigation of cybertutoring logs suggests that MOOs may be especially good for developing the metacognitive aspect of writing (perhaps more so than traditional face-to-face conferences), but he also notes that writers need to be used to “MOO-ing,” a factor that cybertutors must be prepared to deal with. Another challenge for working with students is the recurrent problem of inappropriate online behavior. In “Ethics, Plugged and Unplugged: The Pedagogy of Disorderly Conduct,” Jane Love provides brief but effective suggestions for developing a pedagogy that “seeks not so much to eradicate disorderly conduct as to illuminate it—or, more properly, to use it to illuminate what passes for disorderly conduct. It requires of tutors and instructors that they shift a disciplinarian focus on obedience to one of sensitivity to tension and that they deftly shift to the tutee the burden of responsibility for how to respond to such tension” (185).

Muriel Harris supplies a good deal of wry wisdom in “Making Up Tomorrow’s Agenda and Shopping Lists Today,” such as her passing comment about the need to persuade administrators that adopting new technology calls for adding personnel, not decreasing it (201). The chapter
raises key questions about the ways writing centers might put technology to use, succinctly outlining research agendas in several areas. The final section consists of a list of “if . . . then” statements (“If you want to do x, then be sure you get y”) designed to help writing center directors determine the technologies most likely to allow them to meet their particular needs.

In the final chapter ("How Many Technoprovocateurs Does It Take to Create Interversity?") , Eric Crump sketches some “transitioning principles” for an emerging alternative—an “institution that cares about learning and has as its infrastructure learning environments rather than classrooms, that has as its basic social unit learning communities rather than segregated professional scholars and amateur students” (232). OWLs, Crump suggests, already point in this direction.

If the other chapters in *Taking Flight with OWLs* are not so millenarian in tone as Crump’s, they share his optimism about the use of new technologies in the writing center and the development of new types of writing centers. When cautions are raised, they are generally of the most pragmatic kind. However, the critical reflection largely absent from this collection is an informing presence throughout *Wiring the Writing Center*. Indeed, *Wiring the Writing Center* is a more satisfactory publication in most respects. For one thing, it is more coherent as a collection. Part of the greater sense of unity comes from the way in which the fourteen chapters are distributed under three headings, most of them concentrated in two groups: “Models and Strategies for Wired Writing Centers” (seven chapters), “Critical Assessments of Wired Writing Centers” (five chapters), and “Resources for Wired Writing Centers” (two chapters). This sharper focus is enhanced further by the depth of treatment (chapters here are nearly twice as long as those in *Taking Flight*).

An even more important source of that sense of unity is the clearly defined editorial vision for the collection. Perhaps surprisingly, that clarity emerges from a carefully articulated sense of uncertainty. In the substantial Introduction, Eric H. Hobson points out that recent developments should be regarded as “essentially first-generation experiments, optimistic forays into the pedagogical unknown” (x) and acknowledges his own ambivalence about them. Despite his own increasing dependence on (and appreciation of) newer technologies, he cautions that the allure of the new may lead in directions writing centers may not recognize: “[. . .] many writing centers are creating themselves in the form of their antithesis, that nemesis writing lab. Put bluntly, many
OWLs consist primarily of the contents of old filing cabinets and handbooks—worksheets, drill activities, guides to form—pulled out of the mothballs, dusted off, and digitized” (xvii).

Guarded optimism, tempered by critical reflection on past and current practices, informs the subsequent essays as well. In this respect, the two most revealing chapters are those by Neal Lerner and Peter Carino. Each writer takes a different route in his historical exploration. Lerner’s examination begins with the so-called laboratory method of writing instruction introduced as early as the 1890s, tracing the subsequent development of individualized instruction eventually carried out (evidently without any sense of the irony) via programmed instruction. As he points out, these Skinnerian drill-and-practice approaches continue to be available and are often found in writing centers today—they are particularly compatible with online environments—despite long-standing research demonstrating their ineffectiveness. Carino focuses on writing center literature dealing with computers, finding a sustained “tension between technological endorsement and technological resistance” (172). Beginning with 1982 (the year of the first identifiable printed discussion dealing specifically with computers in writing centers), he divides the scholarship into three “eras,” carefully unpacking the tensions and contradictions (often unrecognized) within the various pronouncements. Urging writing center professionals to become well versed in the new technologies and to “assert what we know about live pedagogy,” he concludes with this colorful but judicious caution: “If OWLs are going to carry us into flight rather than eat us like rodents, if MOOs are going to produce more milk than dung, if we are going to cruise the information superhighway without becoming roadkill, we will need to remain vigilant against the intoxication of our enthusiasm” (192-93).

Among other chapters of particular interest in Wiring the Writing Center is Ray Wallace’s analysis—from the viewpoint of a former writing center director now in higher administration—of the danger of allowing technology to “assume the primary responsibility for the transmission of the knowledge we have to share” (170). Aware of both the appeal of this technology in a cost-benefits sense and of its potential to enhance the work of the writing center, he urges that writing centers not lose sight of their original mandates: “We must use technology more effectively to retain our human side, our naturalness, and our ability to gauge human perception of information” (170). Also worth noting is Sara Kimball’s politically astute passing observation about the ways a publicly accessible Web site can
demonstrate commitment to undergraduate instruction (a real issue for state-funded institutions) at the same time it demonstrates its productive use of funding (64).

Those in search of practical guidance for implementing newer technologies will find the makings of a useful “template” for asynchronous tutoring in Barbara Monroe’s “The Look and Feel of the OWL Conference.” Likewise, Stuart Blythe provides an extremely useful overview of four types of usability research methods that can help the new researcher design a suitable approach. (Blythe supplies welcome illustrations—both positive and negative—from his own experience as well.) Those about to develop or update a Web page will find Bruce Pegg’s guided tour of twenty such pages still useful (if now unavoidably dated), not least in the evaluation criteria briefly sketched there.

Although the various chapters in the two collections under review contain a fair amount of speculation, only David Coogan labels a portion of his work as “academic fantasy.” That label, however, applies to only the latter part of his book. The opening chapter (“Tutors and Computers in Composition Studies”) is a challenging look at the place of writing centers and peer tutoring within the larger field of composition studies. A rewarding complement to the historical studies by Lerner and Carino, this chapter draws on Louis Althusser’s notion of ideological state apparatuses to examine the concept of functional literacy and the “strategy of containment” that attempted to isolate writing problems within composition courses and then within writing labs/centers, where a variety of “teaching machines” were often employed to remediate the students remanded there. Coogan works out the complex relationships among this strategy, the rise of technocentrism, and the emerging process movement in composition, along with the often conflicted roles of writing centers in responding to these developments. Although he endorses the efforts of writing center professionals to resist functionalism by looking at writers as individuals and finding productive ways of intervening in individual writing processes, he exposes a number of limitations in those attempts. This persuasive analysis includes a critique of Stephen North’s often-quoted manifesto (“The Idea of a Writing Center”) that, along with North’s own 1994 “revisiting” of that topic, ought to be required reading for writing center professionals.

For the purposes of the present study, however, Coogan’s principal concern is the tendency of many writers to set up face-to-face tutoring and email tutoring as binaries, with email tutoring figured as the largely unsatisfactory substitution for the privileged term. Coogan urges that
writing centers move away from this oppositional pairing and reconceptualize email tutoring not as a limited means of carrying out the conventional work of writing centers but as a different sort of “space for informed resistance” to the strategy of containment (25).

His second chapter, “Email ‘Tutoring’ and Dialogic Literacy,” uses transcripts of email tutoring sessions with two students to illustrate the capacity of email to provide a space that emphasizes “the individual’s changing obligations to other writers” (xviii). Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Coogan celebrates the dialogical interactions that take place in this forum, finding it much less akin to traditional “tutoring” than to collaborative writing. (Incidentally, Coogan contributes a chapter to Wiring the Writing Center that makes much the same argument, but he uses completely different material, a refusal to engage in double-dipping that is to be commended.) This chapter also addresses certain questions Coogan anticipates. First, as to the concern that this approach puts more emphasis on the writing than on the writer, Coogan argues that this forum makes it more difficult to essentialize the writer because the writer and his or her writing become identified; thus, a new “self” emerges with each message or draft, thereby calling attention “to the performative nature of all types of face-work” (54-55). A more troubling question is access, and Coogan points out that access involves the ability not only to secure and operate equipment but also to engage in the range of literacy practices associated with it. The challenge is ultimately ideological: “If it seems impossible to imagine dialogic literacy amongst a population of less-able, poorly prepared writers, what does this say about the way writing center has been constructed and the way we legitimatize that construction?” (55). The final question appears to be simpler. The transcripts of email sessions testify to a tremendous investment of time and energy, and it is quite possible to question the practicality of this approach, especially given the pressures on students, peer tutors, TAs, and adjunct instructors. However, Coogan reveals important limitations in this view, not least in its condoning of “the ways students tend to see writing as an emergency—something that needs to be handled quickly” (55).

That need for immediate closure—a familiar condition of life in academe and elsewhere—plays an important role in “The Medium is Not the Message,” the third chapter. There Coogan examines two other sets of online exchanges in which he has been unable to engage students fully in the practice of dialogic literacy. In describing some of the limits of email tutoring, he emphasizes “non-technological aspects of change that are . . . much more entrenched and, hence, much more difficult to refigure” (57);
that is, in these cases the pressures of functional literacy evidently are too great to withstand. At the same time, however, this chapter also suggests that Coogan’s dedication to his own project puts students at a disadvantage when their agendas are not consistent with his. In the previous chapter, the students are older (one is a self-identified graduate student, and the other refers to over eleven years’ experience touring with a Christian drama troupe). The confidence with which they proceed is in marked contrast to that of the two evidently younger writers featured in the third chapter. One of them Coogan situates as stranded on the novice side of the novice-expert divide, and the other is a student whose first language is not English. Although Coogan affirms his belief in helping students appropriate disciplinary discourse and helping non-native speakers learn Edited American English—and both students explicitly raise these issues—the logs of the sessions suggest that these are not high priorities for Coogan. At one point, the transcript includes this straightforward question from the first student: “There are different types of writing, for let’s say English and poly sci. In what ways do they differ?” Coogan’s answer strikes me as both condescending and coyly evasive: “Ahh. Yes. They are different and they are the same. Different in that they have distinct disciplinary concerns, different ways of using writing. But the same, because they come from you. It’s all your writing” (73). The “spectacular misunderstanding” that underlies the set of exchanges with the non-native writer is finally reconfigured as Coogan’s own superior grasp of the situation: “What Kee needs is not so much advice on syntax and grammar—or not just that kind of advice—but a point of view on using English in the context of this history class” (82). Despite the repeated invocation of Bakhtin’s principle of answerability in the previous chapter, it is little in evidence in these exchanges or the author’s discussion of them.

The penultimate chapter (“The Idea of an Electronic Writing Center”) is a praiseworthy attempt to deal with an alternative view of the electronic writing center, one that differs from what Coogan describes as typical of OWLs, which are all too often merely storehouses of information “about grammar, style, genre, and the composing process . . . [and] launch-pads to Internet search engines, online library catalogs, dictionaries, subject guides[,] . . . and other online writing labs.” This situation should be recognized “for what it is: the ISA [ideological state apparatus] of functional literacy reproducing itself by controlling the latest relations of production in cyberspace” (86). The fantasy (Coogan’s own term) offered in its place calls for an intertextual approach that would make student texts available in the electronic writing center, so that
students and tutors could enter into dialogue with those texts. This triangulation would situate a given discussion within a larger one, thereby empowering students “by broadening their understanding of how and why they are contributing to a subject” about which many previous texts have already been produced (92). Turning back to the email sessions reported in the second and third chapters, Coogan provides some student texts and projects some ways that engaging with them possibly might have changed those interactions.

Finally, in “Computing the Field of Composition,” the brief concluding chapter, Coogan returns to the larger field of composition studies with which he began and reaches “a most unpromising conclusion: Composition has sustained the idea of community at a time when community has become untenable.” He proposes that we look instead for a “dissensual ‘community’”—one free of the bonds of predetermined views imposed by culture or state and one in which we can practice “a form of reading and writing that strengthens, rather than weakens, our connections with each other.” Such an alternative exists, he concludes, “at least potentially” in the idea of the electronic writing center (119).

If I am less convinced by the two speculative chapters with which The Electronic Writing Center ends and troubled by the implications of the third chapter, I have no hesitation in recommending that anyone concerned with the intersection of writing centers and computer technology pay particular attention to the two opening chapters of the book. Indeed, the first chapter would be read with benefit by anyone interested in the larger field of composition studies. Taking Flight with OWLs has still more limited value, but Wiring the Writing Center ought to be welcomed for its guidance in practical matters and its critical reflection on them.

Dayton, Ohio