

# Conversations

## *Social Computing and Collaboration in Online Writing Labs*

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*"The community of discourse is the market"*  
Thesis 39 – The Cluetrain Manifesto

### **The Need for Conversation**

Bruffee notes that peer tutoring is a form of collaborative learning. He speaks of a "conversation of mankind" that enables a writer to find his or her own words through a discussion. The discussion is meant to be directed towards some larger goal, but it should remain a conversation of relative equals. (Bruffee)

Conversation allows individuals to feel comfortable; writers become capable of consciously improving themselves when they do not feel threatened. Unfortunately, for many writers, the classroom can be a threatening place. It is the job of any writing center to lower a writer's resistance to the process and to improve the process itself.

The improvement of a writing process comes from both writer and tutor sitting down as equals. Without that comfort, any writing center would be relegated to being a remedial service used only by students actively encouraged or forced to visit.

To add to the complexity of the issue, only a subset of students learn best by directive methods. For others, a directive form of tutoring only helps the paper, not the writer. As the oft-repeated goal of a writing center is to improve the writer and not the paper, it is important to have an assortment of possible techniques available to assist in any tutoring session.

These issues have been effectively addressed within the confines of a face-to-face writing center. Writing centers have found the best possible methods for tutoring. Many sessions show aspects of directive tutoring coexisting next to social-constructionist techniques. The face-to-face session is a collaborative success story. The online writing session has not been such a success.

## Online Writing Labs – Current Practices

The current iteration of the Online Writing Lab (OWL) does not address this need for conversation, or when it does, it does so in ways that harm the conversation. To illustrate the difficulties, we will introduce Shawn. Shawn is a sophomore at the university and is enrolled in a psychology class that requires many different papers. Shawn's papers are consistently returned with grades lower than he expects.

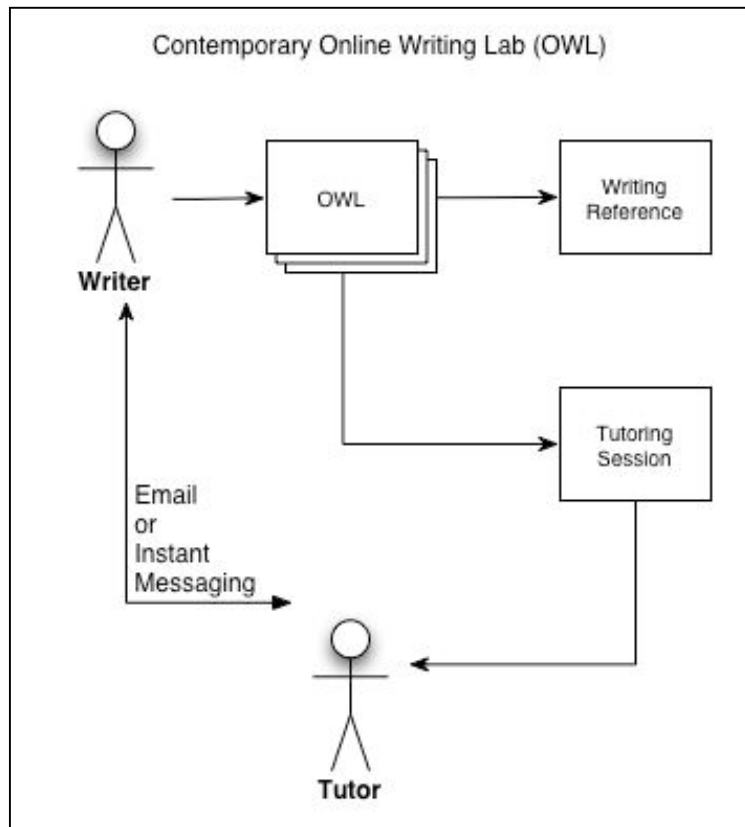
Desperate to not have another paper returned with a 'C,' Shawn resolves to figure out a way to improve his writing. Due to working commitments, Shawn is unable to go to the writing center on campus. He decides to advantage of the OWL that the writing center has made available.

Once Shawn has logged into the OWL, he sees two major areas within. One area is has a large amount of reference material. While he sees the use of this, Shawn decides that he needs a more personalized treatment. He goes to the tutoring area of the site.

Here he hastily fills out a form. He then uploads his paper and goes to work. From this point, two things can happen. Let us look at both cases.

### Case 1

When he gets home, he notices an email from the writing center. Jane, a tutor for the writing center, has looked at his paper and offered some suggestions. The suggestions are direct; Shawn implements them immediately. His paper earns him a 'B,' and he is happy with the result. His next paper earns yet another 'C,' and now he is dependant on Jane.



## Case 2

When he gets home, he notices an appointment for an Instant Messaging (IM) session. At the time of the appointment, he receives an IM from Jane, a tutor at the writing center. Jane and him go back and forth talking about his paper. As she asks him a question, he switches over to Word, looks at the part she's talking about, and returns to the chat with an answer. This goes back and forth for about an hour. Shawn has some ideas of where to go, but feels frustrated with how little got accomplished

Both cases are indicative of the current way that writing centers implement tutoring. The first case forces Jane into a directive session, regardless of Shawn's learning style. As it turns out, Shawn is not focused on improving himself and is not focused inwardly enough to really determine what his mistakes mean. He has not really learned anything aside from the ability of Jane to "fix" his paper.

In the second case, there is a conversation, but it is harmed by process of having to switch applications every time Shawn wants to look at his paper. The "noise" generated by this hassle makes Shawn more focused on getting through the session than improving his own writing.

The case that we did not address is that of Shawn taking advantage of Jane. The lack of a serious investment on Shawn's part means that he could easily have been watching TV while having his "session," leaving Jane to waste her time and effort.

Effort needs to be put into making Shawn more invested in the process. In addition, an OWL should be some degree of combination between both cases.

## Social Computing – From Networks to Communities

Writing centers have historically been a non-traditional service to combat a growing rhetorical illiteracy. Their greatest benefit is the way they break down barriers of expert-apprentice and teacher-student. They allow for communication on a collaborative, conversational level. It is perhaps fitting that a solution for the problems discussed earlier comes from a non-academic source.

Within the IT industry, the small subset called social computing has become quite important. It is this area in which citizens become journalists; where an encyclopedia is not written by a couple experts employed by own company, but by a great number of volunteers; and where collaboration and community building rule.

Social computing talks about enabling users. Social computing paradigms enable users to self-publish, to form an online community, and to collaborate on each other's work. It is the last two that we will focus on here.

In Shawn's unwritten case, there needs to be a way for him to feel more invested in the OWL. If the OWL were a community in which Shawn belonged, he would be far less likely to show it any sort of disrespect. In fact, he would want to assist the community (especially after a number of times taking advantage of it).

In addition, his two positive cases showed the difficulties inherent to online collaboration. In 2001, a unique collaborative effort appeared that has a direct effect on this problem – Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>). Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that anyone can edit. The encyclopedia portion is not directly important to us, although we will address it later on. The fact that every page on Wikipedia is editable by any logged on user is.

The technology behind Wikipedia is the wiki. A wiki is an online application that allows for anyone logged on and given appropriate permission to add a page or modify an existing page. Wikipedia is not the only example of this, but it has become the Google of online encyclopedias. Very few people use Encarta anymore; Wikipedia has more content and is more timely than its competitors.

At this point, Wikipedia has an extremely active community that maintains the information, removing the equivalent of graffiti and adding content quickly. These very active members take a personal responsibility for the respectability of Wikipedia.

## Reinventing the Storehouse – Fostering a Sense of Community Online

Most Online Writing Labs have a resource center made public, a list of documents meant to assist in the process of rhetoric. In many ways, this is an effective use of technology; students are free to refer to these sources, and the sources are unchanging. It is a non-interactive portion of the OWL, simple to set up and maintain. Unfortunately, it does refer back to Lunsford’s “Center as Storehouse.”

“I’d like to suggest that collaboration as an embodiment of this theory of knowledge poses a distinct threat to one particular idea of a writing center. This idea of a writing center, what I’ll call ‘The Center as Storehouse,’ holds to the earlier view of knowledge just described – knowledge as exterior to us and as directly accessible. The Center as Storehouse operates as [an] information station or storehouse, prescribing and handing out skills and strategies to individual learners. ... They tend to view knowledge as individually derived and held, and they are not particularly amenable to collaboration, sometimes actively hostile to it.”

*Andrea Lunsford*

*“Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center”*

It is obvious that having a static central repository exemplifies this negative direction. The goal of a writing center should be collaborative and conversational. How can online tutors be expected to be peers when the system imagines them as experts?

The resource center needs to be dynamic; changing as writers’ needs change. If tutors are constantly modifying the environment based on tutoring sessions, the storehouse concept begins to wane. Unfortunately, even as we move

away from the storehouse, we have moved no further in fostering a sense of community.

Community appears wherever people interact. An OWL that attempts to foster a sense of community must embrace this concept and find ways to foster these interactions. If we tie this need into the need for dynamic content, we notice a social computing solution – a wiki.

It really quickly becomes an assumption that a group can do things like "Oh, I took my PowerPoint slides, I showed them, and then I dumped them into the wiki. So now you can get at them." It becomes a sort of shared repository for group memory. This is new. These kinds of ubiquity, both everyone is online, and everyone who's in a room can be online together at the same time, can lead to new patterns.

*Clay Shirky*

*"A Group Is Its Own Worst Enemy"*

A wiki would enable students to modify resource pages with information they would want, as well as give them access to an ever-changing dynamic resource center. Control should be maintained by the writing center, for fear of abuse and simply bad advice.

A system should be put into place, enabling students to submit changes. These changes should be *quickly* reviewed, and if found appropriate, they should be put into the documents. The importance of student input should be emphasized consistently. A form for student changes should be, at most, only a click away.

The overall goal of a resource center within an OWL should be based upon the principle that the resource center is the repository of a "shared memory." This moves the OWL away from Lunsford's concept of a "storehouse" and into territory more indicative of a face-to-face writing center.

Now, we have a burgeoning community of student writers who feel empowered and welcome within the Online Writing Lab. In addition, our concept of an OWL is changing into something more *collaborative*. Writers are interacting with tutors and administration, commenting on the work that was put out there by the staff. We begin to move towards an online peer component. We present Lunsford's idea of a "Burkean Parlor Center."

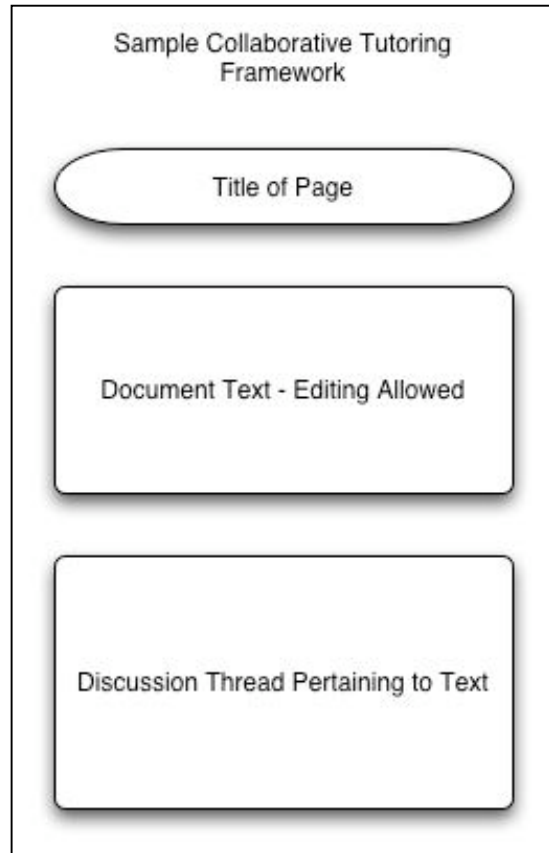
## From Direction to Conversation – Enabling a Collaborative Tutoring Session Online

With the initial collaborative base in place, the tutoring component appears too directive for a modern OWL. Emailing a Word document back and forth is simply too structured. An IM conversation is too far away from the work in question. Is there a way to incorporate the collaborative concepts discussed with the resource center into a tutoring session?

The wiki serves as a strong theoretical framework, albeit with some modification. In this case, it is not in the best interest to have someone sign off on changes to the document. The document should only be accessed by the tutor and the writer and needs to be easy to modify. The writer must be informed every time there is any sort of modification to the document, so that he or she is not checking the OWL and becoming frustrated. There should also be two separate sections, one for changes on the paper itself and one for a running dialogue between tutor and writer.

Current wiki systems are generally modifiable by everyone. For the purposes of an OWL, that is preferable (although limitation as to who sees what should be included in the implementation). The problem arises when the technical literacy required to modify text is higher than the average student's is. This is true with current wiki implementations. The technology must be made accessible to everyone before this is a valid option.

The final task that any implementation would need to address is that of file compatibility. The writer must be able to send the OWL a Word file and have the wiki convert it into the appropriate entry. If there is anything extra a writer must do, it should be clearly labeled and easy to understand.



## Conclusions

If both of these recommendations are implemented, the traditional OWL becomes something much more collaborative and conversational, something more along the lines of a writing center. By addressing the difficulties that arise when one uses the current paradigm, Online Writing Centers can become a technological solution to a cultural problem, mainly how can a student receive a similar level of service online as in person? (Levine et al.)

In the corporate environment, social computing is overtaking traditional images of marketing and support. There is an overwhelming movement towards a customer-friendly, authentic voice. For the corporate world, social computing harkens back to a shopkeeper. For the writing center, social computing enables the center to perform in much the same way online and off.

Implementing such a system does come with some responsibilities, primarily focused on maintaining a strong level of service. Response times must be quick (a couple of days at the most), the OWL cannot be open to the world, and some rules must be put into place for tutors to determine what can and cannot be done to a writer's paper. Allowing open access will overload the abilities of the tutors and harm the system as a whole.

There is a great deal of optimism that should be present when talking about incorporating social computing initiatives into the academic environment, and if such an implementation is done well, the optimism is well founded. A collaborative, conversational approach to the Online Writing Lab can only benefit and complement a physical writing center.

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