To the Classroom and Beyond: Designing and Implementing an Online Writing Center to Help Students Develop College and Career Writing Skills

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Abstract

This report discusses the development of an Online Writing Center (OWC) in the fall of 2000 at a two-year technical college. We designed the site to help students apply writing skills to their academic and professional careers. A central goal was to provide a resource for students unable to access academic support services during the day.

We piloted the tutorial component of the site with evening and online classes and advertised the other resources of the site to instructors who participate in an organization for those interested in using online resources in the classroom. A survey was distributed to students and faculty who were informed of the OWC during the pilot semester.

Based on the results of the survey and an analysis of site use during the pilot semester, we identified strategies for expanding, enhancing, and funding the OWC. This paper includes the results of the surveys and a discussion of future plans for the OWC.

History

Western Wisconsin Technical College (WWTC) is a two-year institution that offers associate degrees, technical diplomas, and technical certificates. The college consists of seven campuses in towns throughout Western Wisconsin, with the main campus housed in La Crosse. Current enrollment includes 4,651 students, of which 974 attend classes on outreach campuses. The roster of night classes includes 3,581 students, and the roster of online classes includes 231 students. While the college offers many resources for students who attend the La Crosse campus during the day, the number of resources available for students who attend online, evening, or outreach classes is limited. The Online Writing Center (OWC) grew out of a desire to provide additional opportunities for writing assistance and student-faculty interaction with our evening and outreach students.

Often, students attend evening, outreach, or online classes due to work schedules, family obligations, or farming responsibilities. Some of the students are working parents, trying to support families and attend school at the same time. This leaves little flexibility outside of regularly scheduled class times for visiting the main campus for academic support. This prompts the college to find new ways for these students to access campus resources, a concept which has been challenging higher education for years. Over twenty-five years ago, Chickering noted the importance of providing alternative learning environments for commuter students:

> Educational effectiveness for the new students entering higher education—most of whom are commuters whose contact with faculty members, other students, and the institution is limited—will depend heavily on our capacity to create the administrative processes, the educational arrangements, and the faculty members which will help implement new alternatives and help each student choose those most effective [1].

Current educational research reinforces the importance of these ideas. Kerka asserts that one of the three main factors in helping to retain adult students is to provide "alternatives to stopping out" at the campus [2]. As we considered creating and implementing the OWC, our hope was that it would provide for increased student-faculty interaction and send a clear message to evening, outreach, and online students that their success truly does matter to the college.

In the spring of 2000, collaboration began between two Communication Skills instructors, the Dean of the General Education Department, the Director of the Academic Success Center, the General Education Technology Consultant, and a WWTC student. The group wrote a grant proposal and submitted it to the Western Wisconsin Technical College Foundation to request funding for the design and pilot of the OWC. The Foundation provided a grant in support of the project. The grant provided an hourly stipend for development of the center. It was not to be used toward the purchase of hardware, software, or other materials for the center. During the summer of 2000, work on the Western Wisconsin Technical College Online Writing Center began.

Site Overview

The purposes of the OWC include the following:

- To provide a handbook of the mechanics and process of writing, geared expressly toward the students of WWTC.
- To provide links to online resources that may prove valuable to writing students at WWTC.
- To provide an online critiquing service for all students, but targeted specifically at evening students and students not on the main (La Crosse) campus.
- To promote writing and recognize achievement in writing.

In working towards the latter purpose, we began advertising Western Ink (a.k.a. Wink) campus-wide in November of 2000. Wink is an online journal created to provide a publication forum for outstanding writing by WWTC students. To further encourage student writers, we established an award for the best piece of writing submitted to the journal during the 2000-2001 school year. The General Education Division contributed $50 to serve as a prize to the winner of the award. The Campus Shop contributed a sweatshirt to serve as second prize.

Methods (Pilot Test)

The pilot test of the site took place during the fall semester of 2000. While the site was published on the Internet and accessible by all, we limited the use of the online critiquing service to evening students enrolled in Written Communications, online students (enrolled in Written Communications and Technical Reporting), Telecourse students (enrolled in Technical Reporting) and students on outreach campuses (enrolled in Written Communications). In total, we advertised the OWC to approximately 160 students. This allowed the opportunity to test the practicality and effectiveness of online critiquing on a manageable number of submissions.

Students in the pilot group were informed of the site either by their instructors (online and outreach classes) and/or through a classroom visit by one of the OWC instructors (evening classes on the La Crosse campus). The extent to which students were encouraged to use the site was left to the discretion of the course instructor.

Data on Site Use During the Pilot Test

Table 1: Site Visits

Total number of days (including weekends and holidays) in the semester	118
Total number of "hits" to the site over the semester	574
Average number of "hits" per day (including weekends and holidays)	4.9

Table 2: Submissions to the Online Tutor

Total number of days (including weekends and holidays) in the semester	118
Total number of school days in the semester	80
Total number of submissions to the Online Tutor	53
Average number of submissions per day (including weekends and holidays)	0.5
Average number of submissions per day (days school was in session)	0.7
Number of students informed of the service (approximate)	160
Number of individuals submitting work to the Online Tutor	20
Percent of informed students using the Online Tutor	12.5%
Average number of submissions per student using the Online Tutor	2.7

Table 3: Critiques of Online Submissions

Total number of school days in the semester	80
Total number of submissions to the Online Tutor	53
Total time spent critiquing submissions (in minutes)	2365
Average time per submission (in minutes)	45

Methods (Student and Faculty Survey)

Near the end of the pilot semester, two surveys were prepared and distributed. One survey (Appendix A) was designed to measure student use of the site and student satisfaction with the site. This survey was sent to those students who had been made aware of the OWC as part of the pilot test.

The second survey (Appendix B) was designed to measure instructor use of the site and instructor satisfaction with the site. The survey was sent to the faculty in the Communication Skills Department, as well as those who participate in the college's Online Support Group. The site had been introduced to these two groups early on in the semester.

Results of the Student Survey

Out of approximately 160 students surveyed, 76 students responded, yielding a return rate of 48 percent. Of the surveys returned, twenty-one students, or 28 percent of those responding, indicated that they had used the OWC. The primary reasons why students did not use the OWC included perceptions that the assistance wasn't necessary (33%), forgetfulness about the existence of the site (13%), a lack of computer or Internet access (11%), and a lack of time to visit the site (5%).

Regarding which audience the site would best serve, all twenty-one respondents (100%) agreed that it was appropriate for technical college students. Twenty students (95%) also indicated that the site would be appropriate for four-year college students, and eighteen respondents (86%) believed the site to be appropriate for high school students. Twelve students (57%) indicated that business professionals could make use of the site, indicating that over half of the students did recognize that the information could be useful to them in a professional situation. However, when asked what their main goal was in submitting a document to the online tutor, eleven students (85%) indicated that the goal was "to get a better grade on an assignment." Two students (15%) were motivated to "learn better writing skills to use later in my career," and two students (15%) indicated a category of "other."   These results indicate that for most students, the motivation for using the OWC related more strongly to an immediate grade than to a desire to increase overall writing skills.

Of the 21 respondents who visited the site, three students (14%) indicated that they used the Handbook section of the site, thirteen students (62%) indicated that they had used the online tutoring service, three students (14%) indicated that they used the Research and Writing Resources section of the site, and three students (14%) indicated that they had viewed the online journal of student work. Responses indicated a general satisfaction with the clarity, design, ease of use, and quality of information of each of these components of the site. None of the respondents rated any components of the site as "below average" or "poor."

Of particular note is that of the thirteen respondents who obtained tutoring services through the Online Writing Center, twelve of the students (92%) had never worked one-on-one with a live tutor. Given the choice between equal access to a live tutor and an Online Writing Center tutor, five students (38%) indicated that they would prefer to work with a live instructor; three respondents (23%) indicated that they would prefer the Online Writing Center, and three respondents (23%) indicated that they would have no preference between the two. One student cited the accessibility of the site, writing, "Live instructors and students are very busy and scheduling time is an issue. With OWC you can submit and respond at anytime of the day or night." Another student also cited accessibility, claiming that s/he would use "whichever was more convenient at the time."

Convenience was also a factor in the amount of time students were willing to wait for a tutor's response. Eleven of the respondents (84%) indicated that they would be willing to wait two to three days for a response, while four respondents (31%) indicated that they would prefer a response in one day or less. (Some students marked more than one category for this response.) None of the respondents indicated that they would be willing to wait four to five days for a response. The OWC's current timeline for returning work to students is one school day.

Regarding future use of the OWC, the majority of respondents (71%) indicated that they would be using the site again as a student. Three respondents (14%) indicated that they would also be using the site for assistance at work, and three students (14%) indicated that they would be using the site to assist them in their personal writing. When asked whether or not they would recommend the site to others, all students who responded to this question (81%) said that they would recommend the site to others.

Finally, when asked to comment about the site, five students wrote positive comments, ranging from general comments like "very satisfied," to more specific comments, such as, "Thanks for the online access. Working 40-50 hours per week does not leave much time to stop by school for face to face help. This concept is great."

Results of the Faculty Survey

Out of 39 faculty surveyed, 15 responded , yielding a return rate of 38 percent. Of the surveys returned, 8 instructors (53%) indicated that they had recommended the OWC to their students, while 7 instructors (47%) had not. One instructor indicated having placed a link to the OWC on her or his instructional web site.

Of the surveys returned, four (27%) indicated that their students had used the OWC, three (20%) indicated that their students had not used the OWC, and 8 (53%) did not know whether their students had used the OWC. Only one instructor (7%) had observed the feedback received by students from OWC instructors. This instructor indicated that the feedback reinforced lessons in the classrooms, was in line with instructor expectations, and was very positive in terms of tone.

Eleven respondents (73%) indicated that they would be willing to provide copies of their specific writing assignment to the OWC, to help OWC instructors in providing feedback. Two respondents (13%) were not willing to provide copies of assignments, and one respondent (7%) was not sure.

Eight respondents (53%) indicated that they would consider using the OWC as a classroom tool, and one respondent (7%) would not consider using the OWC as a classroom tool; four respondents (27%) were unsure. Three respondents (20%) indicated that they do not have computers available in their classrooms. (One respondent indicated more than one response.)

Consistent with the responses of the student surveys, faculty members also indicated a general satisfaction with the clarity, design, ease of use, and quality of information in each of the site's components. All faculty responses in these categories were either "above average" or "great."

The Future

As we plan the future of the OWC, we must consider both the growth of the site and the funding of it.

Growth of the Site

We are encouraged by the use of the OWC during the pilot semester and by the results of the student and instructor surveys. In addition to expanding the scope of the OWC Handbook and the Resources for Writers sections of the site, we have developed a list of enhancements that we hope to add to the site in coming semesters, including the following:

- Ask the Tutor
- The Writer's Lounge
- The Technical Writer
- The Creative Writer
- Writing on the Job
- OWC Textbook

Ask the Tutor

To date, the Online Tutoring function of the OWC has been funded, in part, through the college's Academic Success Center. Because of the nature of the funding, it has been necessary to collect registration information each time a student submits work for critique. While this is, at most, a small inconvenience for the student, it is more than justified by the service the student receives.

We wanted to create a mechanism whereby students who merely sought an answer to a question could do so without having to complete registration information. "Ask the Tutor" was implemented in February, 2001. It is a simple discussion board that allows anyone to post a question. The site is checked daily by an OWC staff member, who posts responses.

The Writer's Lounge

Writing is too often characterized as a lonely, individual activity. One of the more lofty goals of the OWC is to create a community of writers. To that end, one of our planned future enhancements is a writer's lounge. The lounge will be a place for open discussion of writing-related topics. The lounge could be set up to accommodate synchronous or asynchronous discussion.

The Technical Writer

Technical writing is becoming a more important offering at the college. "Technical Reporting" is an introductory course that is required for several degree programs at the college. In 1999, the college began offering a certificate program in technical communication. That lead to the creation of three advanced courses in technical communication. An A.A.S. degree in technical communication is a possibility in the near future.

The Technical Writer will focus specifically on issues relevant to technical writing. Discussions of various types of technical documents, along with samples, will be featured.

The Creative Writer

While WWTC does offer a course in creative writing, it is not offered frequently and is not a required course in any program. Nevertheless, a section on creative writing can contribute to the OWC's goal of bringing together a community of writers.

The Creative Writer will address various genres of creative writing. It will encourage writers to use the writing process for self-exploration, personal satisfaction, and, perhaps, publication.

Writing on the Job

As a technical college, our students are very interested in applying what they learn to their chosen career fields. Unfortunately, many of our students have trouble seeing writing as a career skill or as a life skill.

Writing on the Job will feature people employed in the types of jobs for which our students are preparing. These people will discuss how writing is a part of their jobs and of their lives. The intent is to help students see the relevance of writing, thus motivating them to work hard at improving their writing skills.

OWC Textbook

As the site grows, its usefulness as a classroom tool increases. The content has been geared specifically for WWTC students, and the interactivity offered by the site can be a real asset to students. Ultimately, we see the OWC taking the place of a textbook in some of the college's Written Communication courses.

Funding of the Site

Development of the OWC was funded primarily through a grant. Likewise, the online tutoring service was funded through the college's Academic Success Center, which is also grant-dependent. While the college has made short-term accommodations to allow us to operate the OWC, there is no guarantee of long-term funding. Therefore, we must establish a plan for the long-term funding for the Online Tutor and for the growth and maintenance OWC.

Throughout the pilot test, faculty members carried out the online tutoring functions. Given the average of 45 minutes spent on each submission, this was a costly process. While we enjoyed the role of tutor, we also realize that the likelihood of the college funding contract faculty in the function over the long term is not great. Many colleges use graduate students as online tutors at a timecard rate that is much more affordable. As a two-year college, we cannot recruit graduate students from within our own walls. However, there are two universities in La Crosse, and a third in Winona, Minnesota, about 25 miles away. One way of reducing our expenses is to hire graduate students from these universities to serve as online tutors. This would not only reduce our operating expenses, it would also enable us to establish new working relationships with the neighboring universities. We believe this creates a win-win situation for everyone involved.

In addition to using graduate students to reduce the cost of providing tutorial students, we have generated a variety of ideas for helping to fund the site, including the following:

- Proposing that a portion of the funds generated through the college's student services fee be allocated to the OWC
- Password-protecting portions of the site (or putting portions of the site on CD-ROM) and charging students for access to that information (in lieu of a textbook for Written Communication students)
- Expanding our relationship with the Academic Success Center, to have greater access to the funding provided to that service
- Applying for additional grants

Whatever the funding mechanism, we believe the OWC has the potential to become a key element in the college's focus on student success. To that end, we feel the college should make a long-term commitment to the growth and maintenance of the site. Even with the use of graduate students as tutors, faculty time needs to be allocated to work in the following areas:

- Growing the site
- Marketing the site
- Maintaining the site
- Recruiting student tutors
- Training student tutors
- Supervising student tutors

Writing is a skill that touches every program area at WWTC, therefore directly affecting the lives of every student at WWTC. We've heard the message from area employers many times over: they want candidates with strong writing skills. With the help of the OWC, we hope to take writing skills to the classroom and beyond.

References

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