

# Between Technological Endorsement and Resistance: The State of Online Writing Centers

by Stephen Neaderhiser and Joanna Wolfe

## **About the Authors**

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Over the past two decades, writing centers have steadily been expanding services and materials they offer online. The way students write and communicate about their writing continues to change, and the writing center has increasingly been looked upon as a site through which technology and writing have the ability to converge in the form of tutoring and collaboration. Muriel Harris makes this point when she urges writing centers to consider incorporating a technological mindset into writing center practice:

Computers as a technology interwoven in communication is a given, as is electronic communication across the curriculum. Writing centers without the technology or staff to work with these students will find themselves no longer in sync with how writers write and with what writers need to know about writing processes as they are affected by technology. (“Making Up” 194)

Yet, even as writing centers are being encouraged to embrace new technology, there are ways that this technology challenges the traditional ethos of the writing center. Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch criticizes writing centers’ “less than impressive attempts to mirror a face-to-face tutoring environment online” (29) and suggests that “some may argue that online tutoring goes much against the idea of a writing center – the idea of Burkean Parlors, of ongoing conversation” (31).<sup>1</sup> In particular, email – asynchronous (i.e., time-delayed) written communication – seems to go against the dialogic nature of writing center interactions. With email tutoring, writers typically email their papers to the writing center and receive written feedback from a tutor. While there is the potential for the writer to email the tutor back with questions, this dialog is short-lived with typical conferences amounting “to only one round of turn-taking: the student sends a text with a question, and the tutor replies; exit” (Spooner 7). In addition to this lack of real-time interaction, email is also limited by the lack of a shared space in which student and tutor can look at the paper. As Harris complains, “if the student wants to engage in an informal conversation or has a number of questions or has a messy working draft or a minimal outline (as many students do when they walk in), email is too limiting” (“Using Computers” 7). Jeffrey Baker even notes that the written nature of the email response raises ethical questions of the tutor’s doing too much of the work for the student. In general, email consultations more closely mirror the type of interaction we might expect between a student and instructor than they resemble the dialogic joint inquiry of the ideal writer-tutor relationship.

Most writing center scholars see greater potential in synchronous (or real-time) consulting tools such as text chat or MOOs. Eric Crump describes synchronous tutoring as offering the best of both worlds, for tutor and student can actively discuss things online and yet both must articulate their contributions in writing where they

can be saved for later reference. Although chat-based tutoring lacks a shared view of the paper, it does allow student and tutor to engage in informal conversation. Breuch suggests that synchronous online tutoring is much closer to the Burkean Parlor ideal that is advocated in much of the writing center literature because tutor and student can “talk” freely and have an ongoing dialogue about writing (32).

Despite the potential of synchronous consulting to match the writing center ideal, Mark Shadle’s 1997 survey of OWLs found only a handful of centers using synchronous conferencing – even though text-based chat tools were widely available at the time and promoted in books and collections such as Faigley’s *Fragments of Rationality* and Selfe and Hilligoss’ *Literacy and Computers: The Complications of Teaching and Learning with Technology*. Shadle concludes his discussion by noting that “OWLs are constantly evolving” (15). Certainly, in the past twelve years, the technological capabilities available to both institutions and students have evolved. Now that many students come to college already immersed in Instant Messaging and other forms of text-based chat, we might expect to see an increase in the number of institutions today using synchronous consulting tools. Moreover, synchronous conferencing has become much more sophisticated in recent years: free conferencing tools, such as AIM Pro, allow users to collaborate via voice or video links. These audio tools, when used with a high speed Internet connection, have the quality of a typical cell phone call. In addition, many conferencing tools offer real-time file or desktop sharing in which participants in the conference can “see” and even manipulate files and applications that are hosted on other participants’ computers (see Figure 1). Thus, file sharing could allow a consultant to use the highlighter tool in a word processor (or even a digital pen if one of the parties has a Tablet PC that allows “digital ink”) to point to specific sections of the writer’s text. Such desktop sharing tools could be particularly useful in modeling research strategies: the consultant could help the writer navigate to a library site, coach the writer in selecting appropriate search terms, and help the writer interpret and narrow the results using advanced search features. In such a case, the shared “control” capabilities of the online conference – where both writer and consultant can simultaneously manipulate the screen while talking normally via the

computer's built-in speaker and microphone – might even represent an improvement on the face-to-face consultation.

A decade after Shadle's initial survey of OWL practices, we were curious to see how and to what extent OWLs have adapted or progressed. Given the seemingly exponential expansion of new technologies for content delivery as well as conferencing, we wanted to find out to what extent writing centers are taking advantage of these new tools – particularly those tools that seem best matched to the collaborative, dialogic ethos of the brick and mortar writing center. Our research questions included:

- How many writing centers are taking advantage of synchronous technologies that mirror the dynamics of face-to-face (f2f) consultation, and how many rely on asynchronous email? In particular, how many centers are taking advantage of new tools such as real-time file sharing, enhanced chat programs, Voice-over IP or other audio or video links?
- What factors seem to influence whether institutions adopt or experiment with new technologies, and what barriers or issues prevent adoption?
- What new services or delivery models are some institutions experimenting with that might be beneficial to other writing centers?

In this article, we provide some key terms and define various methods for conducting online consultations. This review should be useful for writing centers interested in understanding current conferencing technology and what technological options are available to them. We then share some of the results of the Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP), which in 2006 devoted a special section of its biennial survey to the current state and activity of online writing center operations. Looking at these results, we conclude by pointing out trends and obstacles related to various forms of online tutoring, using survey comments and feedback to posit possible rationale for these findings.

This window manages the session and allows participants to set up connections, chat, or share files or desktops.

This window allows the consultant to view and manipulate the writer's remote desktop.

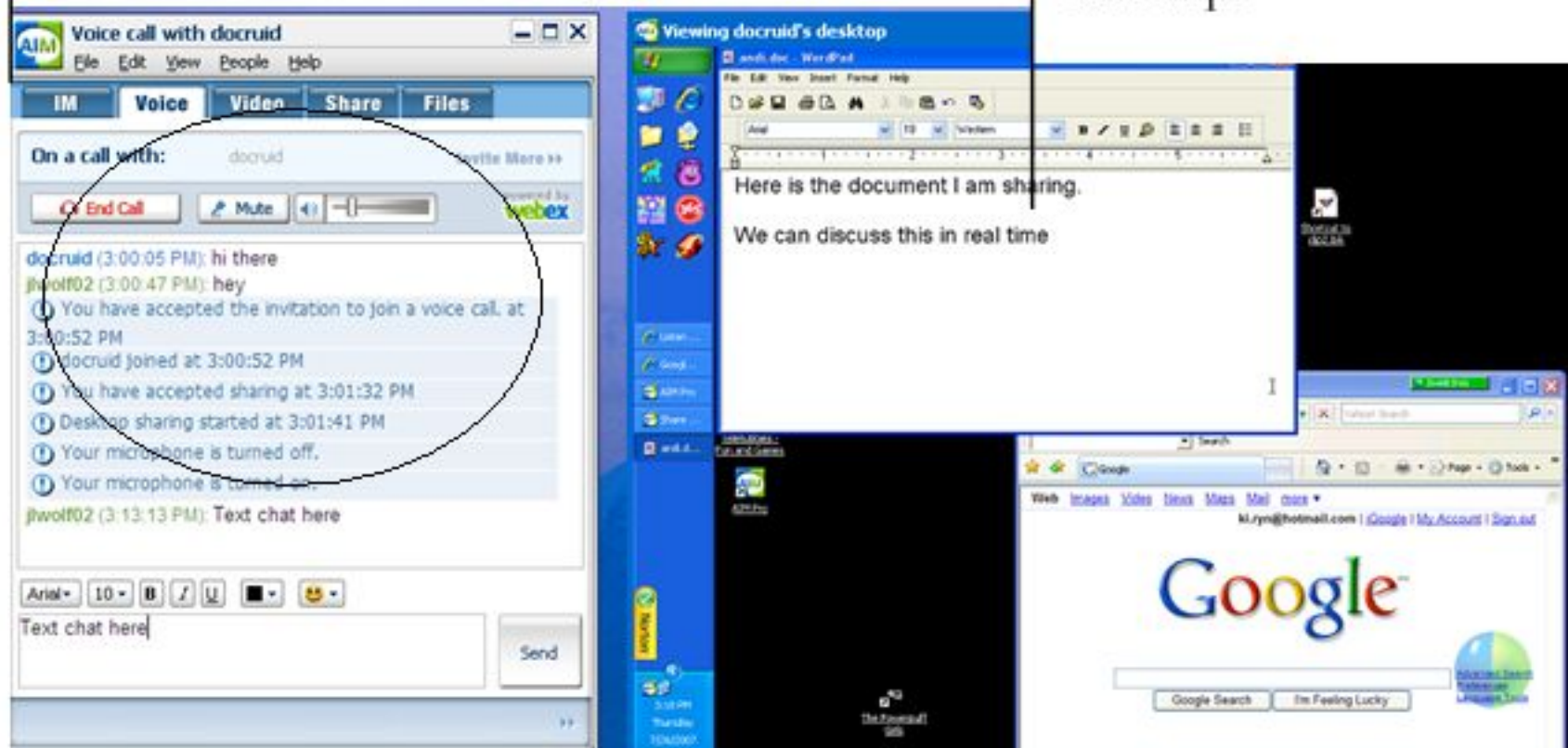


Figure 1: The free AIM conferencing software with desktop sharing and voice audio options turned on. The consultant can view and manipulate the applications on the writer's desktop (or vice-versa), including the word processing and web browser windows. The window to the left manages the session by allowing participants to set up voice or video connections, use text chat, and/or share desktops or individual files.

## Definitions: What is an OWL? What is an Online Consultation?

As Breuch has noted, the term "OWL" is often used to conflate many different types of online services (22). In this document, we use the term OWL as an umbrella term that encompasses two very different types of services: 1) websites offering published, public content and 2) online consultations that consist of private interactions between a writer and consultant and occasionally others:

- *Websites* refer to information that does not change with the needs of a specific author and includes documents and handouts (such as Purdue's OWL), streaming video, presentations, guided tours, interactive tutorials, discussion boards and blogs, and links to other websites.

- *Online consultations* refer to distant one-to-one interactions between a consultant and a writer (or occasionally one-to-many interactions between a writer and multiple parties) in which the object is to “intervene in and ultimately alter the composing process of the writer” (North 28). Online consultations can take place *synchronously*, in real time, through technologies such as text chat, telephone, and computer conferencing or they can take place *asynchronously* through technologies such as email. Although online consultations frequently take place via email, we do not consider the occasional follow-up email between writer and consultant to be an online consultation.

This essay focuses on online consultations since these individual interactions are at the heart of most writing centers’ missions; however, we also report on developments in writing center websites. Thus the term “OWL” here refers to writing center Internet presences that incorporate either or both websites and online consultations.

## **Overview of Methods for Conducting Online Consultations**

Online consultations can be conducted either synchronously or asynchronously. This section provides an overview of the methods available for online consulting along with some of the advantages and disadvantages for each type of consultation.

### *Asynchronous consultation methods*

- Email. The writer emails the paper to the consultant who inserts comments directly into the draft and then emails it back to the writer. Many writing centers mention on their websites that consultants will spend a set amount of time – such as 45 minutes – commenting on the paper. Perhaps the major advantage of this method is that the writer does not need to schedule an appointment with a consultant. In addition, email technology is now familiar to almost all students. However, as noted above, email consultations do not lend themselves to the give-and-take, back-and-forth interactions that characterize face-to-face consultations. To compensate for this shortcoming, many writing centers

encourage writers to email the consultant back with additional questions about the paper; however, anecdotal evidence suggests that such back-and-forth discussion is infrequent and rarely extends beyond a few email exchanges (Spooner).

### *Synchronous consultation methods*

The consultation methods described in this section are often combined with one another. The free AIM conferencing software illustrated in Figure 1, for instance, combines the first four of these methods (other computer-conferencing packages that offer some combination of these four methods include WebEx, Adobe Connect, and Microsoft LiveMeeting). Nonetheless, while these tools are often found in the same software packages, we discuss each method separately in order to highlight the range of online consulting options potentially available to writing centers.

- Text-based Instant Messaging (or chat). The writer and consultant discuss the document in a real-time conference that takes place through text-based instant messaging. Typically, the writer emails the paper to the consultant (or uploads it to a specific website) and the two then discuss the paper using text messaging. One common problem with text messaging is that the discussion is separated from the writer's paper, making it difficult for a consultant to establish the context of his/her comments. Lee Honneycutt found that student peer reviewers made fewer text-specific comments with text messaging than with email because of the work required to establish a common text-specific frame of reference in text messaging. To overcome this limitation, text messaging can be combined with real-time screen-sharing tools (described below), in which writer and consultant share a common view of the document. Common text messaging tools include AIM and Yahoo! Messenger. Most course management systems (such as Blackboard and Angel) also have their own internal text messaging tools.
- Real-time screen sharing. The writer and consultant discuss the document with both participants having the ability to navigate and make changes to a single shared view of the document. The right half of Figure 1 shows real-time screen sharing in AIM Pro.

In this setup, the consultant can access any of the applications on the writer's desktop. This program allows the consultant to use the cursor or Microsoft Word's highlighting or commenting tools to refer to specific sections of the text. The consultant can also initiate a web browser or other application on the consultant's desktop to model the research process. Thus, screen sharing allows writer and consultant to refer to the same applications on the computer desktop just as if they were sitting side-by-side in the traditional writing center (with the added benefit that screen sharing allows both consultant and writer to have their own mouse). One disadvantage of this method, however, is that it requires significant bandwidth and thus is best used when both participants have relatively high-speed Internet connections.

- Real-time audio (or Voice-over IP). The writer and consultant discuss the document using a Voice-over IP connection. Audio consultations frequently (but do not necessarily) include real-time screen-sharing. The left side of Figure 1 shows a consultant and writer sharing a voice-over IP connection. Combining voice-over IP with the screen-sharing tools discussed above, consultants can “point” to a section of a document in the right window and then simply discuss it in a normal spoken conversation. Real-time audio requires speakers and a microphone – most computers have these built-in, or a microphone headset can be purchased for around \$15. The quality of conversation using voice-over IP is comparable to the average cell phone call.
- Real-time video. The writer and consultant discuss the document using video connections via a webcam. Most of the meeting tools that offer real-time audio also have options for video. Yet research on video-mediated communication suggests that it may not offer substantial benefits over voice-only communication in most work situations (Bos et al.; Heath and Luff).
- Phone. The writer emails a paper to the consultant and sets up an appointment to discuss the paper over the phone. This method allows writer and consultant to easily discuss the document (perhaps more easily than with text-based chat). As with text-based chat, however, the conversation suffers from the absence of a shared visual frame of reference: writer and consultant

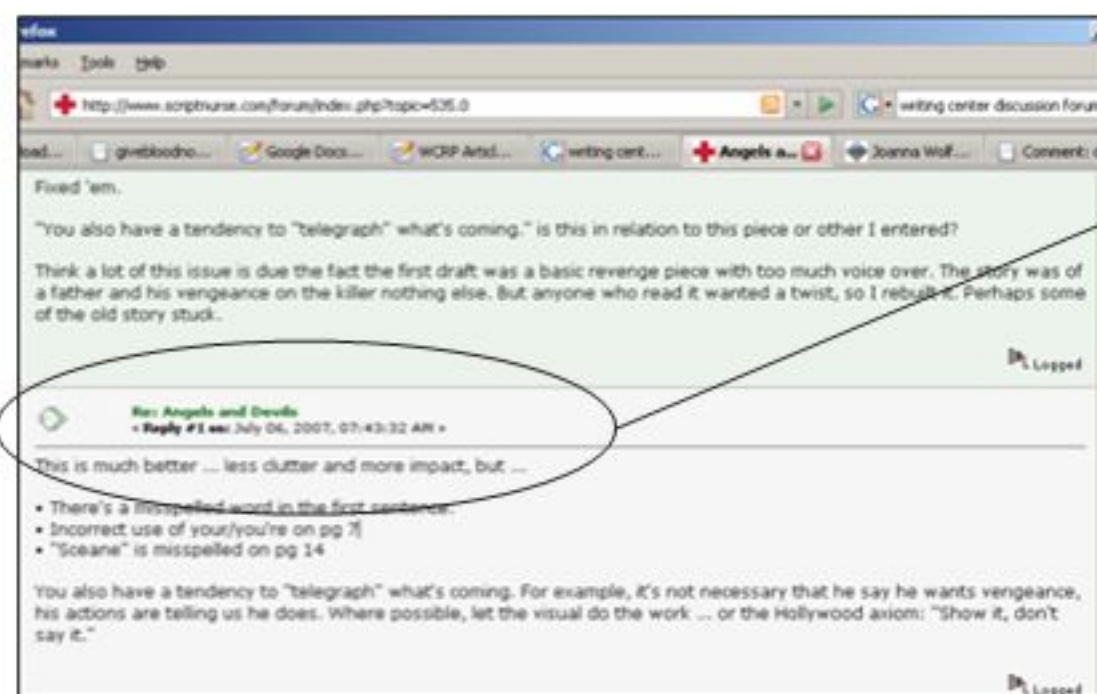


have to work to ensure they are discussing the same section of text. Phone consultations can be combined with other consultation methods. Skype, for example, is one of the more popular Voice-over IP services that allows live audio chat not only between online users, but to and from regular telephones. Instead of paying long-distance fees for these phone conversations, the writing center would pay a monthly fee (around \$30) for unlimited phone calls.

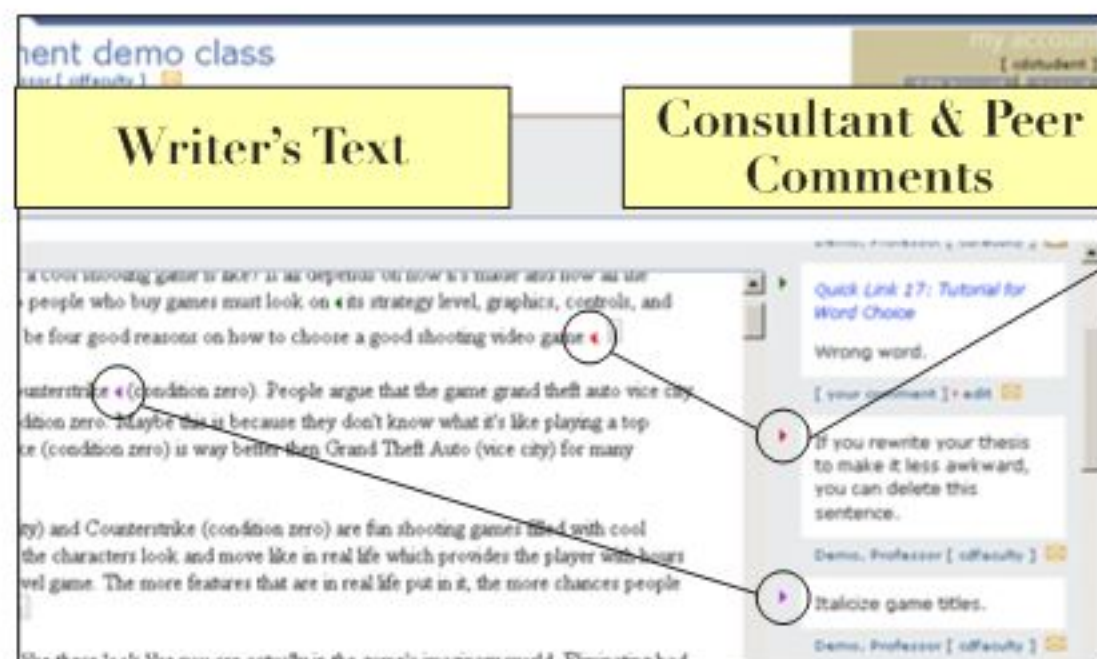
*Methods that can support either synchronous or asynchronous consultations*

- Discussion boards. The writer posts a paper to a website and the consultant (and perhaps others) can comment on it using threaded discussion posts (see Figure 2). Discussion boards are frequently used to allow multiple parties to comment on a paper. Usually this commenting is done asynchronously, but if all parties are online simultaneously, the writer has the opportunity to ask questions and receive immediate responses from consultants or peers. Some writing centers, such as the one at Western Washington University, use discussion boards to provide support to specific classes. Discussion boards (like text-based messaging) separate comments from the primary text, decreasing the likelihood that participants will make substantial text-specific comments (see Figure 2).
- Online commenting programs. The writer submits a paper to a (usually password secured) website where a consultant – and, again, possibly others – comment on it. Unlike discussion boards, which were designed to facilitate discussion of *topics*, commenting programs are specifically designed to facilitate discussion and peer review of *texts*. Thus, whereas discussion boards separate primary text and commentary, online commenting programs “anchor” comments to specific sections of text (Figure 2 illustrates this difference). Bedford St. Martin’s Comment and Turnitin.com’s Grademark are two commenting programs that have been used by writing centers. Although online commenting programs primarily support asynchronous collaboration, they can be adapted to support synchronous discussion of texts.

- Online collaboration programs. The writer submits a paper to an online collaborative writing tool, such as Google Docs, where the consultant and other parties can insert comments directly into the text. If both parties are logged on simultaneously, real-time conferencing can occur directly in the text.<sup>2</sup>



In a discussion forum such as this one, comments are visually separated from the writer's text, making it cumbersome for participants to establish the context of the comment.



In Bedford St. Martin's Comment, consultant comments are anchored to specific section of the writer's text, making it relatively easy to establish the context of the comment.

Figure 2: Comparison of a discussion forum and online commenting program. Where the discussion forum above physically separates comments from the writer's text, the commenting program anchors the comment in the "margin" of the writer's text. Both discussion boards and commenting programs are usually used asynchronously, but can also support synchronous discussion if participants are online simultaneously.

## Methods

### *The Writing Centers Research Project Survey*

The Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP), hosted by the University of Louisville and affiliated with the International Writing Centers Association, conducts a biennial survey to collect bench-

mark data regarding the operation and administration of writing centers. A pilot survey was conducted in 2001 and updated surveys were conducted in 2002, 2004, and 2006. (The most recent survey was conducted in fall 2008, after we completed our study.) The survey includes a total of 59 questions that ask writing centers to report the previous academic year's data on usage, operations, staffing, and administration. A primary purpose of this survey is to provide benchmark information about writing centers. In addition, the survey is intended to serve as a resource for researchers working on projects related to writing center administration. More information about the WCRP can be found at <http://www.wcrp.louisville.edu>.

### *Survey Respondents*

As of fall 2006, the WCRP had information on 1286 writing centers across the U.S. and Canada and a handful of international campuses from such places as the Middle East and Japan. This figure includes data for writing centers in traditional universities and colleges, branch campuses, community colleges, seminaries, and high schools. Out of this total sample size of 1286 writing centers, we received survey responses from 498, or 39%, which is considered a very good rate of return for surveys. And of those 498 responding institutions, 266, or just over half, completed the section on online operations. It is not clear how many of the writing centers that did not complete this information had no information to report or simply opted not to complete the section.

Some of the institutions completing the online operations section of the survey reported OWLs in the implementation or planning stage, with 43 (16%) reporting new OWLs in the last two years and five centers specifically reporting new pilot programs in 2006 to examine the use and demand for online services. These numbers point to the growing demand for OWL services.

### *Survey Questions*

Of the 59 total questions on the 2006 WCRP survey, ten focused on online operations. These questions asked about OWL staffing and funding, quantity and type of online consultations, and types of infor-

mation found on the OWL website. A copy of these survey questions can be found in the appendix. The survey, as in previous years, was primarily available online through the WCRP website, with paper copies available upon request (there were only five requests for paper copies – one percent of the total respondents). After email information was verified, the institutions in the WCRP database were emailed directly several times in fall 2006 and messages encouraging institutions to complete the survey were sent to the WCenter and WPA listservs. In addition, announcements were placed in several writing center and composition journals encouraging institutions to respond.

### *Follow-up Queries*

Several follow-up emails were sent to institutions after the survey was completed, asking for more information about practices we found noteworthy. In addition, information provided in the survey was often verified or supplemented by visiting these centers' websites. Institutions that reported outsourcing their services to companies such as Smarthinking and WCOOnline were also emailed directly to elicit more information about their experiences. In addition, Smarthinking and WCOOnline were contacted directly with questions about their services and usage, but neither institution responded to our queries.

## **Results**

### *Email Dominates Online Consultations*

Table 1 indicates that writing centers tend to make little use of the wide range of technologies available for consulting. Email was far and away the most common technology used, comprising almost 90% of the online consultations. Real time text-based chat was used for an additional 10% of consultations. Real-time voice technologies accounted for less than half of one percent of recorded consultations, although many of the institutions using technologies other than email or text-based chat described themselves as in initial pilot or evaluation phases with the technologies and did not keep close track of the number of consultations. However, even given the lack of record keeping for experimental technologies, the findings here

strongly suggest that few writing centers are taking advantage of the newest consulting technologies: of the 115 centers that reported offering online consultations, fewer than 5% reported even experimenting with a technology that was not available when Shadle did his first survey of OWLs in 1997. These findings therefore suggest that the overwhelming majority of online consultations rely on asynchronous methods that seem at odds with the collaborative and dialogic ethos

Table 1

Type of media that writing centers reported using for their in-house writing centers.

Medium for online consultation	Institutions that report using this medium*		Consultations reported using this medium**	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
Email	91%	115	90.3%	15,016
Text Messaging	17%	22	9.6%	1,602
Phone	6%	8	< 0.1%	6
Voice-Over IP	2%	3	< 0.1%	9
Discussion Board	2%	3	Not reported	
Online commenting or collaboration program	3%	4	Not reported	

\* Because an institution can offer multiple methods for online consultations, totals exceed 100%

\*\* Several institutions indicated that they do not keep separate records for face-to-face and online consultations. Thus the numbers of consultations here are under-reported.

of the face-to-face writing center consultation.

*Few Institutions Experiment with Innovative Consulting Methods*

Table 1 indicates that a small number of institutions have experimented with modifying or adapting mixed synchronous/asynchronous text-based tools such as discussion boards, collaborative writing programs, or peer review programs to support writing center work. Often these institutions have used these tools to expand the consultation beyond the typical writer-consultant pair. For instance,

writing center personnel at the University of Georgia<sup>3</sup> use their own in-house software to facilitate three-way discussions among writer, consultant, and student peers. Hellenic University similarly uses Netmeeting – a suite of chat, file-transfer, and drawing tools – to support three-way consultations. We were also told about pilot projects using online commenting tools or Google Documents for real-time distance conferencing.

Very few of the universities completing our survey have taken advantage of the voice conferencing and filesharing tools now offered by many web services. A few, however, do stand out. Florida Atlantic University, for example, began a pilot program in fall 2006 combining Skype, an Internet phone service that allows free long-distance phone calls, with real-time filesharing tools offered by WOnline to provide a robust voice conferencing environment that has increased students' return visits.<sup>4</sup> In addition, FAU has incorporated webcams into their practices, which helps both tutors and students to read each other's physical responses during online sessions. The University of Louisville has conducted some pilot experiments using real-time audio combined with desktop sharing on a Tablet PC that allows the consultant to use a digital pen to point to and mark on specific parts of a writer's paper in real time, much as a consultant might use a pen in a traditional face-to-face consultation. Students and consultants both responded favorably to these pilot experiments, although it should be noted that these consultations were conducted under ideal conditions, with high bandwidth Internet connections and immediate technical support on hand.

*Many More Institutions Experiment with Innovative Web Delivery*

In contrast to the relative lack of innovation in methods for providing online consultations, writing centers seem more willing to experiment with new methods of delivering website content. Writing centers at Furman University, Mercy High School, and the University of Georgia, for example, make use of blogs, online surveys, or discussion forums that allow writing center administrators to quickly update the site with news and up-to-the minute content while also providing a place where writing center users can offer feedback

and interact personally with the site. Many writing centers host new media content, including those at the University of New Hampshire and the University of Akron, both of which host informational videos about their centers. Other centers use new media to deliver material traditionally presented in face-to-face workshops: the University of Houston-Victoria archives presentation slides of workshops and presentations along with audio recordings of the presenter, and Indiana University South Bend offers podcasts on punctuation. Several writing centers, such as the University of Texas at Austin, have developed interactive writing tutorials. Other sites offer links to cutting-edge resource software. For instance, George Mason University's writing center publicizes Zotero, a free web browser extension for collecting, managing, and citing research sources developed in-house. Thus, though most writing centers have not experimented with newer technology for conducting online consultations, they appear willing to embrace it to make their website more interactive and inviting.

Table 2

OWL services by type of institution

Type of Institution	% offering online consultations	% offering consulting methods other than email/text chat	% with advanced websites
Two-year postsecondary ( <i>n=44</i> )	77%	7%	21%
Four-year Liberal Arts College ( <i>n=47</i> )	49%	4%	32%
Comprehensive university (with Masters' programs) ( <i>n=71</i> )	56%	7%	24%
Research University (with doctoral programs) ( <i>n=58</i> )	66%	16%	47%

*Research Universities Are Most Likely to Experiment with  
New Technologies*

Table 2 indicates that research universities are more likely than other schools to experiment with offering new consultation technologies or new media materials on their websites, although two-year colleges may be more service-oriented. While 16% of research universities have used some technology other than email or text chat for online consultations, only 6% of other institutions had done so. Similarly, research universities were more likely than other schools to offer comprehensive websites. Nearly half of the research universities completing our survey reported having information such as online handbooks, newsletters, PowerPoint presentations, podcasts, blogs, sites for students to publish work, interactive media, or other information that went beyond providing basic scheduling and contact information. By contrast, only 28% of two-year colleges had such advanced media on their sites. These findings suggest that research universities may have more capital (whether financial capital or human capital in the form of graduate students) that allows them to experiment with new technologies.

In contrast to research universities, two-year colleges seemed to be more utilitarian in their approach to online writing centers. Even though two-year colleges reported employing fewer cutting-edge resources, they were also more likely than other institutions to offer online consultations. The majority of these consultations rely on email, and two-year colleges were slightly more likely than other institutions to rely on email as their only method of online consultation. These findings suggest that two-year colleges are more likely to offer only basic email services than to experiment with new technologies. There are a variety of likely reasons for this seeming paradox. For one, two-year colleges have fewer resources and no graduate students, which limits their ability to experiment. The average number of consultants typically employed at two-year colleges was half that employed at research universities, even though the number of annual consultations reported at each type of institution was roughly equivalent. In addition, two-year schools typically have a student population with considerable time constraints, from com-



muting to school and work; this population may find asynchronous options such as email more appealing than synchronous options that require them to commit to a particular conference time. In contrast, asynchronous email consultations allow students to receive help regardless of their schedule.

### *OWL Support Is Usually Amorphous*

Many of our survey respondents indicated that their OWLs were funded by one-time investments or that the responsibilities for maintaining the OWL were simply absorbed into existing personnel's duties. Three quarters of the writing centers responding to our question about OWL budgets reported no funding for online writing centers. While in some cases this 0% funding response might mean that centers simply carry no line item or specific allocation in the budget for online tutoring, other comments suggest that the low level of budgeting for OWL resources represents a larger trend, in which OWLs are perceived of as one-time or ad hoc investments. As one commenter stated, "Sadly, we have received no additional funds for tutors or web development since the grants that began the project." Others indicated that responsibilities for the OWL were simply absorbed by existing personnel. Responses such as "it's simply part of what the director (me) does" or "One professional staff member manages our website, but the financial support is zero in the budget" were common.

Even when institutions seemed to have sufficient support for their OWLs, respondents noted that distinguishing between "OWL services" and typical face-to-face operations was difficult. As one commenter noted, "We don't separate this out – we consult as needed on line when we are not busy with face-to-face." Very few institutions had consultants designated specifically for online tutoring. Many respondents mentioned that all consultants' duties included both online and face-to-face consulting. These responses indicate that OWL support is often marginal, difficult to define, and easily swallowed up by other writing center responsibilities.

Although a majority of writing centers indicated either minimal or unspecified funding levels for their OWLs, a few reported success finding support from other programs or sources within their institution. One center reported receiving funding for its OWL

from the Continuing Education Department at their university, and another indicated that it employed a “distance education tutor” funded through the Distance Education program. One school indicated that an undergraduate student tech fee directs funds into a special account that pays for online consulting and new computers every three years. Although our data does not speak directly to this issue, overall, research universities seemed more successful than other institutions in obtaining explicit funding for their OWL operations: 39% of research universities reported *some* budget for their OWLs, as opposed to 30% of two-year colleges, 23% of comprehensive universities, and 19% of four-year liberal arts colleges.

*OWLs Continue to Meet Resistance and Lack of Interest both in and out of the Writing Center*

Perhaps our favorite response to the survey came from the respondent who repeatedly wrote “An online writing center isn’t really a writing center is it?” While this response was an anomaly, many of the administrators who completed our questionnaire exhibited an attitude we came to characterize as “they can come to us.” Such attitudes were particularly prevalent among residential campuses. For instance, one respondent commented, “As a small, residential liberal arts college, face-to-face consultations are not a challenge for our students.” Others mirrored this notion, stating that, “Since most students live on campus, most consultations are face to face,” and “Ours is a residential campus, so it is much quicker for students to show up at the Writing Center than it would be for them to have online conferences.” These comments suggest that *physicality* is key to writing center relationships and that when physical consulting is an option, online services (or at least online consultations) are simply not needed.

While residential campuses often seemed to assume that online operations were not appropriate for their student bodies, other schools reported dropping online operations because of lack of student interest. For instance, one institution responded that “We got our online consulting system up and running for the Spring of ‘06. We had only one student, a deaf, distance learning grad student, take advantage of it.” Another institution reports “We did try this a few

years ago, but there weren't enough calls to justify the expense." Thus, even as some writing centers reported expanding their operations due to high demand, others reported shutting them down because of lack of student usage.

*There Is Little Agreement on What Qualifies Someone to Consult Online*

Although our survey did not specifically ask about online tutor training or qualifications (an oversight that we corrected in the 2008 survey), several respondents made comments that suggest a wide range of attitudes about what makes a consultant qualified to tutor online. Of the 40 institutions that opted to comment on *who* provides tutoring, almost half indicated that everyone in their writing center was qualified to and did provide online consulting as needed. Comments such as "every tutor does both face-to-face and online as needed" were common. In some cases, respondents clarified that all of their consultants had received training, but others indicated that the only qualification for conducting online tutoring was the consultant's personal interest. Some schools indicated that only their graduate students or tutors with at least one year of experience conduct online consultations. Other institutions designate specific consultants to respond to writers online. Still other schools indicated that only their professional staff are sufficiently "qualified and experienced in online tutoring" to provide this service. These comments suggest that while some see online tutoring as something "everybody does" as part of their writing center duties, others perceive it as a highly specialized task to be performed only by those with sufficient training and experience.

*Online Outsourcing May Be Challenging Writing Center Support*

When the WCRP initially set out in spring 2006 to update contact information for the many writing centers in the WCRP directory, we found that six centers previously listed in our directory no longer had functioning websites and had transferred their operations to Smarthinking.com, an online service that offers academic tutoring for many subjects, including writing. In addition to these institutions that had "outsourced" *all* of their writing center operations to Smart-

hinking.com, three institutions reported outsourcing just their OWL operations to Smarthinking, while retaining their face-to-face writing centers. A fourth institution further volunteered that “a couple of years ago, we offered online writing assistance through Smarthinking – a private online tutoring service. The cost was very high and we used up our funding for this project.”

Three of these four institutions responded to our email requests for more information, telling us that a key factor in their decisions to use Smarthinking was a lack of staffing necessary to maintain an in-house OWL. All three institutions additionally commented that students were highly satisfied with the service, although they also pointed out that this information on satisfaction came from surveys distributed and analyzed by Smarthinking. It is difficult to know how to interpret this trend and its impact on traditional writing centers.

## Discussion

Writing in 1998, Peter Carino notes a “tension between technological endorsement and technological resistance” in writing center discourse on computers (495). Our survey on OWL services and operations provides evidence of this continued tension, ranging from the respondent who quipped “an online writing center isn’t really a center is it?” to the many centers that provided details about their new services and content. Overall, we tended to find that writing centers were more likely to adopt new technologies for delivering website content than for holding online consultations. But there were also additional interesting trends worth examining as potential future developments for writing centers.

### *How Many Writing Centers Are Employing Synchronous Methods?*

Perhaps the most striking finding from our survey is that over 90% of reported online consultations were conducted asynchronously through email. While email does have some advantages over face-to-face conversation – including anonymity and the potential for the time delays involved to foster reflection (Breuch and Racine 248) – email’s lack of support for informal conversation about writing seems to work against the collaborative, interactive ethos of the

face-to-face writing center. Overall, this finding suggests that online writing centers have a long way to go to meet the ideal of the collaborative Burkean parlor. However, there may be good logistical reasons for the predominance of email. Moreover, given that email is so persistent, we would benefit from additional research to show what benefits email may offer compared to synchronous (face-to-face *or* online) methods.

We found very little innovation in how online consultations were conducted. Our survey suggests that over 99% of reported online consultations conducted in 2005-2006 used text-based technologies: few institutions even used the phone to supplement their online consultations, let alone new real-time voice and screen-sharing conferencing tools. While we are certainly not advocating new technologies just because they are new, we did find this lack of experimentation surprising because recent years have seen an increase in the number of free conferencing tools that greatly expand what can be accomplished in an online consultation.

#### *What Factors Prevent Online Experimentation?*

Although there are many reasons why writing centers might not experiment with new or unfamiliar methods of online consultation, we suspect that many in the writing center community may simply be unaware of the tools available for online consultation, or assume that these technologies are out of their reach. In fact, several institutions that currently provide email consultations told us on the survey that they would like to provide real-time consulting but lacked the funds or technical capabilities. Such responses indicate that many may be unaware that such conferencing requires only an Internet connection (such as the one used to download email or browse the web) and a free software download. The primary obstacle to switching from asynchronous email to real-time consultations may be figuring out how to schedule the real-time conferences.

Another reason that writing centers may decline to experiment with new conferencing technologies is disillusionment with text-based chat conferencing. Researchers in computer-mediated communication have often noted that an inability to “anchor” a comment to a particular section of the primary text greatly inhibits conversation

because participants have to work harder to establish a common frame of reference. In a study comparing peer-review comments in email and text-based chat, Honneycut found that the inability to anchor comments in the primary text made writers perceive chat as less helpful than email. Students made far fewer specific text-based comments when using chat, a finding that may indicate why synchronous conferencing is sometimes described as lacking reflection. It is possible that the difficulty in using chat to discuss specific parts of a paper may have caused many students and institutions to give up on using real-time conferencing altogether. However, a recent pilot study by Brown, Cazan and Griffin suggests that newer conferencing technologies may alleviate these drawbacks. The researchers found that both writers and consultants perceived voice conferencing as more helpful and friendly than text-based chat and were able to discuss more writing issues in this environment. In fact, given the strong difference that voice interaction seems to make in online consultations, we were surprised that more centers did not take advantage of the phone to allow a consultant and a writer to talk about a draft that had been emailed in advance.

One other factor that could influence whether or not writing centers have adopted new consultation methods may lie with students themselves. Some of our survey respondents noted that their attempts to establish an online space for tutoring had been less than successful, with minimal or no participation from the student body. As Spooner notes, this may be a PR problem that can be solved with advertising (6). Indeed, survey comments indicated that some residential and other campuses actively *chose* not to promote their services. We also suspect that many students using online writing centers may rarely, if ever, visit the face-to-face center and thus are unfamiliar with the dialogic environment encouraged there. For these students, email feedback – with its formal similarity to the feedback they are accustomed to receiving from instructors – may be all they want or know to expect from the writing center. Given the option of simply dropping off a paper in an electronic mailbox, these students may fail to see what else could be accomplished with the additional effort of scheduling an appointment to discuss the paper interactively – no matter in what environment this real-time interaction occurs, face-to-face or online.

*What New Services Are Some OWLs Beginning to Offer?*

As stated earlier, we were surprised to find very little experimentation among writing centers when it came to technologies available for consultation. One notable exception, however, was Florida Atlantic University. At FAU, multiple technologies such as real-time filesharing, Voice-over IP audio, and webcams have been incorporated into online consultations, though writing center personnel note that their experimentations have faced challenges. Jessica Cooke, the Assistant Director for FAU's University Center for Excellence in Writing, states: "this is a lot of 'techno' stuff, and lesser-experienced students probably won't ever utilize the online consulting function." In fact, students at FAU have sometimes mistakenly signed up for online consultations unaware of what is involved, thus requiring patient coaching through a somewhat cumbersome ten-minute initial setup period. Despite these frustrations and the occasional resistant student, FAU reports that after they have learned the setup procedure, students generally return for additional online consultations. They attribute this student loyalty in part to "an exceptionally dedicated and experienced" online consultant (Cooke). The issue of student participation is vital, of course, to writing centers' attempts to incorporate technological options into their consultation operations. In our own institution's experimentation with audio consultations, for example, we found that many students did not have – or were not willing to use – a microphone headset for the real-time voice consultations.

In contrast to the lack of experimentation for conducting consultations, we found institutions more willing to adopt newer technologies on their websites. Survey respondents told us about writing center blogs, interactive tutorials, video presentations, and other interactive and new media – all hosted on their websites. This emphasis on creating attractive and interactive websites may in part be related to writing centers' traditional focus on creating an inviting space. Breuch, for instance, discusses the need for writing centers to develop engaging conceptual models – such as a writing cafe or a writing studio – for their online presence, suggesting that such models provide an environment for online writing center work that may help users "locate" their services (36). Even institutions that claimed they

did not need to offer online consultations because of the residential nature of their campuses nonetheless often worked to create inviting and attractive online spaces. The one-time funding initiatives that seem to characterize much OWL development may further explain why writing centers are more likely to focus on websites than consultation services. Whereas website content can be created and then left alone, online consultations require ongoing investment.

### **Wave of the Future?**

Even as many writing centers are focused on creating an online space, we also found that when we tried to contact some centers, their operations had been completely outsourced to companies such as Smarthinking.com. Other institutions still maintain a physical presence, but have outsourced all of their online operations. Such outsourcing has been discussed on the WCenter listserv and in other writing center venues, sometimes with open hostility towards the idea. Holly Moe, for instance, questions the value of a “jiffy editing service” provided by Smarthinking in which “students submit their documents...and receive a version that has been ‘corrected’”(16). Not only has the quality of Smarthinking’s feedback been questioned, but the method of this feedback (via asynchronous email) represents a limited idea of what online writing consultations can be. It is worth noting that Smarthinking does offer live, online tutoring for math and sciences, but has opted not to expand this synchronous service to their writing consultations.

Writing center professionals have also expressed discomfort with the corporate nature of Smarthinking – not only does the company offer editing services that many writing centers eschew, but the “jiffy” service Moe describes invokes the metaphor of a drive-through oil change service rather than the Burkean parlor of ideas and dialogic exchange. This corporate perspective is only re-emphasized by Smarthinking’s website, where the company refers to its online tutors as “E-structors<sup>®</sup>” (Smarthinking, Inc.). One of the schools currently subscribing to Smarthinking noted the distanced nature of the services the company provides: “Smarthinking E-structors just don’t have the insight into [the] courses or assignments that in-house tutors would have.”



An alternative to the corporate outsourcing represented by Smarthinking can be seen in eTutoring.org, a consortium headed by the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium that currently connects 34 schools. Through this service, schools can expand their tutor base either by opting to use eTutoring's tools with their own tutoring resources, or by pooling their tutoring resources with other institutions. This shared model of online tutoring thus allows an individual institution's students to access tutors from other participating schools, thereby greatly expanding the tutoring coverage that can be offered. In addition, as it is coordinated through an academic institution rather than a corporation, eTutoring.org may appeal to writing center administrators more than the Smarthinking model. The Director of eTutoring, Carolyn Rogers, also points out that although their methods for tutoring are asynchronous, they promote a collaborative reviewing process that encourages "building upon a prior tutor's response and the student's subsequent drafts" thus approaching the Burkean Parlor ideal.<sup>5</sup> Consortia such as eTutoring represent an interesting trend that future research on writing center operations should investigate further.

Our data suggests that more research and experimentation into the costs and benefits of different methods for conducting online consultations are needed and that research universities may need to pave the way. We found that research universities were more likely than other institutions to experiment with innovative consultation methods, to have more sophisticated websites, and to have a budget for their online operations. Once these institutions work out the kinks of such services, other institutions may be able to reap the benefits of their experimentation. However, we suspect that more effort is needed to educate the student body on why a real-time consultation is preferable to email feedback. More research that compares the costs and benefits of various online consultation methods is needed to both understand and help "sell" the best methods to writing centers, students, administrators, and other stakeholders.

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If your writing center would like to participate in future surveys by the WCRP, please visit [www.wcrp.louisville.edu](http://www.wcrp.louisville.edu) and select the link, “Tell Us about Your Writing Center.” Or you can contact Vanessa Kraemer, WCRP Assistant Director, at [vanessa.kraemer@louisville.edu](mailto:vanessa.kraemer@louisville.edu).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The use of the Burkean Parlor metaphor in writing center scholarship traces back to Andrea Lunsford's 1991 article, "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center." Lunsford contrasts the Burkean Parlor with the "Storehouse" and "Garret" writing centers to apparently focus on the collaborative potential of writing center consultations that involve groups rather than writer-consultant pairs. Later scholars have taken this idea of the Burkean Parlor writing center to refer to ongoing and continuous conversation that extends beyond the confines of a single one-hour consultation. We are using the more commonly referred to idea of the ongoing conversation when discussing the potential power of synchronous online consultations.

<sup>2</sup>This article was coauthored using the Google Docs collaborative writing tools in order to maintain a single, shared copy of the manuscript as we progressed. While we primarily used Google Docs asynchronously, there were times when we were both online and were able to chat electronically about changes we were making in the text.

<sup>3</sup>We cite the names of individual institutions only in cases where we have been able to verify—either through follow-up email contact with the director or through an investigation of that institution's website—information obtained through the survey.

<sup>4</sup>Florida Atlantic University also informs us of a new online consulting module created by WCOOnline that would eliminate their need for Skype: students are able to access file-sharing and Voice-over IP audio connections in the same step. This module is available to WCOOnline subscribers for \$35 a month.

<sup>5</sup>It is also worth noting that eTutoring.org also offers synchronous tools—including real-time audio, video and application sharing using Adobe/Macromedia's Breeze—for tutoring in other subjects including math, Spanish, and science but not for its writing services. According to the Director of eTutoring, the writing lab is by far the most widely utilized service it offers with over 3000 student writing submissions in Spring 2007 alone. Using synchronous tools for writing consultations would put too much strain on existing resources (Rogers).

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