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## Review: Wiring the Writing Center

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**Hobson, Eric H., ed. *Wiring the Writing Center*. Logan, Utah: Utah State UP, 1998.**

*Reviewed by James A. Inman and Donna N. Sewell*

*Wiring the Writing Center*, edited by Eric Hobson, is the first book in print about the impact of electronic technologies on writing center work. Published by the Utah State University Press, the collection weighs in at 254 pages and includes three sections: “Models and Strategies for Wired Writing Centers,” “Critical Assessments of Wired Writing Centers,” and “Resources for Wired Writing Centers.” Recently, *Wiring the Writing Center* was named winner of the 1999 National Writing Centers Association Outstanding Scholarship Award, and it is described in promotional material as “A must-read for writing center directors and their staffs, whether approaching the decision to wire their own center for the first time or to upgrade it” (*Wiring*, online). In the introduction Hobson states the purpose of the book as being to “discuss the possibilities and limitations that online applications offer to writing centers” (x). At this goal, the book succeeds.

What makes *Wiring the Writing Center* particularly unique is the status of authors participating and the audience targeted. In inviting chapters, Hobson includes voices from writing center notables, like Ray Wallace, Neal Lerner, and Sara Kimball, and from leading technology scholars, like Barbara Monroe, Stuart Blythe, and Rebecca Rickly. What readers encounter, then, is a productive mix of seasoned writing center practitioners all reflecting on the nature of their craft in this computer age. Hobson’s choice of authors also helps us to understand the audience he targets. That is, because we hear from field veterans, we can assume that others in the field will be especially interested in the discussion.

Part One of *Wiring the Writing Center*, “Models and Strategies for Wired Writing Centers,” introduces research strategies, praxis, and design information. For anyone interested in research strategies, the chapters by Barbara Monroe and Stuart Blythe should be required reading. In “The Look and Feel of the OWL Conference,” Monroe does an excellent close reading of email tutorials as a genre, offering terminology for analyzing email tutorials. Breaking email tutorials into “front notes,” “intertextual commentary,” and “end notes,” Monroe names the component parts, explains their functions, and provides examples in a chapter that is rich with the texts of students and tutors (7). Monroe’s inclusion of student voices and tutor voices shows her analysis at work, and she lays the groundwork for further research. Blythe’s chapter, “Wiring a Usable Center: Usability Research and Writing Center Practice,” introduces

readers to usability research, discussing such methods as “interviews and questionnaires,” “focus groups,” “thinking-aloud and question-asking protocols,” and “self-reporting logs” (107). Blythe notes the appropriateness of usability research methods for examining technology use in writing center theory and practice as these methods “provide one way to reflect critically upon the interaction between users, environments, etc., not by helping us build abstract models by which to design networked technologies for writing centers, but by helping us to observe and reflect upon tutorial interaction mediated by networked computers” (112). Like Monroe’s, Blythe’s chapter is further strengthened by his willingness to show his own attempts with these methods. These two chapters should prove helpful for anyone interested in creating, designing, and researching technology use in writing centers.

Writing center staff and administrators familiar with accounts of technology use will recognize the names of David Coogan and Rebecca Rickly, who provide glimpses of technology use in action. In “Email ‘Tutoring’ as Collaborative Writing,” Coogan unfolds an extensive email exchange between himself and a graduate student, Ruth, who is working on a thesis. Despite Coogan’s admonition to remember that this tutorial occurs via email, readers may forget that the conversation is asynchronous, especially after learning how to analyze email tutorials by reading Monroe’s chapter. The collaborative nature of the sustained conversation between Ruth and Coogan provides a look at dialogic email tutorials. Examining a different use of technology in “Reflection and Responsibility in (Cyber) Tutor Training,” Rickly takes readers inside a tutor-training course that relies heavily upon appropriate use of technologies and offers suggestions for instructors of such courses. After sharing the online elements of her tutor training course with readers, Rickly offers several suggestions for fostering reflection: “Collaborate with Colleagues,” “Collaborate With (and Among) Students,” “Be Flexible With (and Within) the Curriculum,” “Become a Learner Yourself,” “Determine Needs and Ask for Resources,” “Take Time to Reflect,” “When Using Technology, Have a Plan,” and “Don’t Be Afraid to Change That Plan” (59-60). Rickly grounds her ideas in the context of the course she describes, helping us see how and why we should do likewise.

The remaining chapters in Part One deal with designing writing center technologies for varied uses and audiences. In “WAC on the Web: Writing Center Outreach to Teachers of Writing Intensive Courses,” Sara Kimball reminds readers that online writing centers have audiences beyond students, and she examines design choices relevant to Web pages for instructors of writing intensive courses at the University of Texas at Austin, where she directs the campus writing center. Clinton Gardner focuses on two-year colleges in “Have You Visited Your Online Writing Center Today? Learning, Writing, and Teaching Online at a Community

College” and explains the creation of the Salt Lake Community College OWL with its areas for “Learning in the Center,” “Writing in the Center,” and “Teaching in the Center” (81). Finally, Kurt P. Kearcher considers the potential of an intranet for online tutorials in his “The Other WWW: Using Intranets to Reconfigure the Who, When, and Where of Network Supported Writing Instruction.” He shares specific reasons for choosing an intranet over the internet to provide writing assistance and takes readers through planning, managing, and connecting an intranet. Writing center directors should find the chapters by Kimball, Gardner, and Kearcher useful in designing and evaluating uses of technology in their own contexts.

In Part Two of *Wiring the Writing Center*, titled “Critical Assessments of Wired Writing Centers,” we can come to understand elements of writing center work in both “Virtual High School Writing Centers: A Spectrum of Possibilities,” by Pamela B. Childers, Jeanette Jordan, and James K. Upton, and “The Community College Mission and the Electronic Writing Center,” by Ellen Mohr. Each of these chapters demonstrates some practical implications for wiring writing centers. Reminiscent of *Writing Centers in Context*, Childers, Jordan, and Upton profile each co-author’s high school writing center (ranging widely from an urban center to an all-male private school) and include engaging critical reflections about their success, as well as possible changes to be made. Readers will find useful the position descriptions the co-authors include and should glean many promising ideas for their own centers, both at the high school level and beyond. Mohr’s work demonstrates a similar critical link between institutional direction and writing center objectives. What seems especially engaging about this chapter is Mohr’s ability to weave her own professional development with the development of electronic aspects of her center, from software acquisition to hardware maintenance; too often scholars do not make such a connection and try instead to tell one aspect of their story, independent of the contexts in which it resides. Mohr includes lessons which should be useful for readers of all levels: “Writing Centers Should Not Be Computer Labs” (155); “Computers Will Never Replace Tutors” (156); and “How and When to Use Software is Important to Tutor Training” (157). Taken together, these chapters add significant richness to the book’s emphasis on wise use of technologies.

Part Two also offers an especially engaging look at how computers and other technologies have come to impact writing center practice. In “Computers in the Writing Center: A Cautionary History,” Peter Carino carefully outlines the structure of Gail Hawisher, Paul LeBlanc, Charles Moran, and Cynthia Selfe’s *Computers and the Teaching of Writing in American Higher Education, 1979-1994: A History*, using similar time periods to organize his own thoughts about the emergence of computers in writing centers. In his categories, including “New Technologies, New

Pedagogies, New Questions: 1987-1991,” Carino provides a detailed rendering of writing center voices, and the entire piece proves to be one of the most thorough and well-conceived we have encountered. Ray Wallace’s “Random Memories of the Wired Writing Center: The Modes-to-Nodes Problem” pairs well with Carino’s to offer an important view of the rise of computers. Wallace tells us about the impact of large-scale educational trends (demographics, missions, etc.) on electronic writing center practice, and he articulates two scenarios for us to consider: the first, where the writing center becomes a “technological center” (165), and the second, where the writing center is a “technological disaster area” (166).

Another chapter, and recent winner of the NWCA Scholarship Award, contributes important ideas to the history of computers in writing centers: Neal Lerner’s “Drill Pads, Teaching Machines, and Programmed Texts: Origins of Instructional Technology in Writing Centers.” Lerner links the rise of instructional technology in education with writing center theory and practice, a connection on which many scholars fail to draw; the chapter demonstrates how the connection can be productive, even essential, for us to understand. Lerner does not focus explicitly on the technologies employed; instead, he demonstrates how learning styles and strategies can be supported (or not) by the technologies, especially how they can be understood in institutional settings (119). The final line of Lerner’s chapter reflects a tension we see often in contemporary writing center practice: how we respond to the rapid proliferation of technologies. He writes, “Writing center professionals can be a skeptical lot, experienced in carefully reading texts and uncovering hidden agendas; when it comes to our future with technology, the skepticism is perhaps our greatest asset” (136).

Part Three of the book, titled “Resources for Wired Writing Centers,” includes two chapters, each offering readers important information for further study and consideration. Bruce Pegg’s “UnfURLed: Twenty Writing Center Sites to Visit on the Information Superhighway” provides an interesting survey of online writing centers and resources available via the World Wide Web. Pegg takes us, for example, to the Web home of the Claremont Graduate University Writing Center, which he terms a “very simple site,” and on the same page, he refers us to the writing center at Colorado State University, now being directed by Nick Carbone as part of an impressive campus-wide technology initiative there (202). Pegg includes screen shots, which enable readers to glimpse the Web design of the sites mentioned without having to access them electronically. While there seems always to be danger in publishing in print a list of online resources, which can change by the moment, Pegg, in managing the Web home of the National Writing Centers Association, is the authority, and we can assume that he selected sites that he believes

will be online and stable in the months to come. The second chapter in Part Three, and the final chapter of the book, is Steve Sherwood's "Computers and Writing Centers: A Selected Bibliography," which offers annotated citations of a range of interesting source materials readers may want to acquire and read. Sherwood's categories include, for instance, "Administrative Issues" (218); "Starting a Computerized Writing Center, OWL, MOO, or MUD" (221); and "Training Tutors and Cybertutors" (226). Sherwood's work seems particularly important when considered with other voices in the book.

We give *Wiring the Writing Center* two thumbs up. It meets our field's need by including important information for both researchers and practitioners, and it effectively begins conversations in writing center circles that will inform the future of our work. *Wiring* additionally provides much needed critical reflection about the proliferation of technologies, change too often met only by enthusiastic and uncritical acceptance. Any reader interested in writing center theory and the increased use of computer and other technologies for teaching and learning will want to read this book.

## Work Cited

“*Wiring the Writing Center.*” World Wide Web Site of the Utah State University Press. Online. Available: <http://sticky.usu.edu/~usupress/individl/wiring.htm>. Date of Access: 17 March 1999.

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