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The Virtual Writing Center: Developing Ethos through Mailing List Discourse

Diana C. Bell and Mike T. Hübler

The writing center as a physical and symbolic context both shapes its local environment and is in turn shaped by the communities within that environment. As Joyce Kinkead and Jeanette Harris have argued, “To understand writing centers is to understand the dynamic, interactive relationship that exists between a specific center and the environment in which it exists” (xvi). What Kinkead and Harris insightfully suggest is that writing center spaces are rhetorical and its directors are rhetoricians, reading, responding, and shaping their particular situations.

To account for the contemporary rhetorical situation created by writing centers, we should recognize that they no longer occupy strictly physical or symbolic localities. Rather, their full texture now includes technical or virtual spaces. The impetus for this project stems from our realization that technology in the writing center is not just a vocational tool that enhances efficiency and productivity, but a rhetorical space in which members of our particular community interact. Our purpose, then, is to investigate ways in which the technology we use becomes an integral part of the context in which we exist as members of the writing center community.

First, we will classify computer technology as a social medium rather than a processing tool, a shift historically brought about by electronic mail and mailing list software. Then, through the lens of ethos and shared cultural knowledge, we will explore the ways in which mailing list technology helps constitute the specific community of our Writing Center. This project simultaneously attempts to contribute to the practical and theoretical needs of writing centers. By the former, we mean that financial, administrative, and logistic constraints require more centers to have an online presence with little knowledge of how to utilize that virtual space. Theoretically, it seems pressing to expand the rhetorical model of the writing center so that it accounts for the new kinds of discursive interactions enabled by communication technologies.

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Social Technologies and Mailing List Communication

During the mid-eighties, while many compositionists extolled the virtues of writing with computers, the novelty of computer technology and computer-aided instruction (CAI) was beginning to wear thin for some. Scholarship questioning the promised technological utopia surfaced as composition specialists, including writing center professionals, articulated a range of positions on the role of technology in their daily lives. Peter Carino reports that while some scholars applauded the potential of computer software as a “powerful tool for process writing,” many others questioned the pedagogical implications of CAI because of their concern that the social dynamic of one-to-one conferences would be undermined by the rigidity of software programs (176). Software tools tended to isolate writers from their mentors, their audience, and each other.

Balancing these critiques of the dynamic nature of CAI, a more socially oriented technology surfaced. Gail Hawisher explains that “just as specialists in computers and composition were becoming more critical of the claims made for the value of word processing, computer-mediated communication (CMC), the most tangibly social of all writing media, made its way into the profession” (149). Through computer networking, CMC technologies such as email, LISTSERVs, news groups, and Internet Relay Chat provided virtual spaces where participants could engage in new forms of social interaction. Compositionists quickly embraced CMC, perhaps because its social features mirrored concepts of social constructivism emphasized at that time in composition pedagogy.

Initially, writing centers appropriated email for the purpose of privately tutoring students, and in 1988 Joyce Kinkhead published the field’s first formal discussion of email tutoring in The Writing Lab Newsletter. Carino explains that Kinkhead’s pioneering article “raises issues that show an awareness of the social complexities of writing” and “demonstrates an allegiance to the collaborative dialogue underpinned by social theories of composing” (183).

Carino finds 1992 a time of further technological change for writing centers, in part because of a move from email, a one-to-one communication model, to WCENTER, a mailing list that facilitates online group discussion for writing center professionals. Carino heralds the WCENTER mailing list as “the symbolic entrance of computer mediated communication into the writing center community on a wider scale” (187). Extending mailing list technology to their local environments, writing center directors nationwide began introducing virtual forums in which their own consultants and peer tutors could participate, and dialogic communities of consultants formed within these new virtual writing spaces.
In addition to their historical significance and continued presence in writing centers, mailing lists represent an important communication medium for scholarly inquiry because of the sheer number of participants using the media. LISTSERV, Eric Thomas' original mailing list program developed in 1986, is now used by nearly 100 million people who have memberships on one of 160,000 different public and local mailing lists (www.LISTSERV.com). And several other mailing list software packages exist, such as SENDMAIL, used by our writing center, and Majordomo, a popular freeware program used on many college campuses. Mailing lists are also arguably the most robust form of CMC. At its base, a mailing list is a seamless addition to electronic mail. Because participants in a mailing list “discussion” need no tools or special knowledge beyond using a standard Internet email program to asynchronously send and receive plain text messages from a forum, this communication technology is widely accessible and inclusive. The reliability and sophistication of the email services upon which it is based led Quentin Jones to conclude that the mailing list medium fosters more stable community memberships than other CMC forums.

**Ethos on Email**

Arguing for the existence of a “rhetoric of email,” or at least probing the nature of email (and its coordination through a mailing list) as a communication medium, has taken many forms. Charles Moran approaches the task inductively, describing in narrative fashion his own changes in style, interpretation, and expectations when learning to communicate through email as an academic and a social being. Kristine Blair conducts what she calls “microethnographies” of communities connected by email, calling attention to power structures created within the virtual flow of communication. Michael Johanyak follows a scientific model in exploring the rhetorical form of email, plotting it along the continuum of (edited) writing and (spontaneous) conversation. The question we bring to our analysis of email exchanges on a mailing list intersects with these studies of interpretation, power, and form, but takes a more traditional focus and methodology.

We presume that virtual discussion can be divided into the persuasive categories of logos, pathos, and ethos, and explore how ethos develops through participation in a mailing list. Our approach to this project bears closer resemblance to a rhetorical analysis of textual discourse than to an ethnography or an inductive or quantitative study of group conversation. However, it should be noted that the theoretical constructs for both social scientists and rhetoricians have sometimes been identical. James McCroskey and Thomas Young invest considerable
effort pre-empting the then expanding definition of ethos fostered by factor analysis methods in communication science. They argue that dynamism, attraction, and a host of other scientifically “discovered” variables of source credibility are better suited to explaining the likability of the source, not the persuasive force of ethos. They suggest a return to a more classical division of ethos into (moral) character, competence (expertise or intelligence), and intention (goodwill) as a solid framework for explicating coded data.

While on its face, a 2,500-year-old system for classifying ethos seems rigid and anathema to new media applications, each of the three dimensions of ethos actually has a wide latitude of interpretation and application, perhaps accounting for their perennial usefulness to all sorts of methodologies and rhetorical endeavors. We find the classical tradition a fruitful starting place for our discussion of ethos, and a solid theoretical base to which we can add more contemporary elements.

Both our interpretation of the traditional model and the extensions we borrow from current theory must be suited to the unique character of discourse fostered by CMC. In particular, CMC seems closely associated with the formation of community. For example, Ian Hardy reports that email “created a new culture of interaction” for its earliest users, scientists affiliated with the Advanced Research Projects Agency (23). While this elite group of researchers certainly had known each other and worked together outside of any virtual context, Hardy describes how email as a uniquely informal social space functioned to enhance the sense of community that already existed among them. Internet pundit John December more generally argues that CMC users may “continuously participate in forums for communication that begin to exhibit characteristics of a community—including a shared sense of purpose, norms for behavior, and traditions.”

CMC discourse can involve the same audience in communicative activity over long periods of time, suggesting that our model of online ethos should allow for rhetorical developments across multiple texts. The communities that form on mailing lists, as Quentin Jones observes, coalesce around interactive messages. A single message posted to a list is, in some sense, an ordinary rhetorical artifact, a text composed by an author and delivered to multiple readers. However, Jones recognizes that each message has a more interesting rhetorical dimension because it invites audience members to compose their own responsive texts. Every member of a mailing list is potentially both speaker and audience of the list’s rhetoric. As the number of speakers and topics in a list grows, the messages begin to resemble “overlapping discussions” (cf. Wilkins).

Because the interactivity of messages on a mailing list blurs the distinction between author and reader (or speaker and audience), and so much emphasis is placed on the tendency of an audience to form commu-
nity bonds, our brief exploration of ethos follows audience-centered perspectives. We import from the literature of rhetoric in speech communication some significant contributions to audience-centered theories of ethos. In his 1951 article published in the field's flagship journal, the Quarterly Journal of Speech, rhetorician Edward Pross looks back at Aristotelian texts and determines that audience analysis enters into every phase of building ethos. He calls this rhetorical strategy a "conciliatory ethos" (261). In other words, a speaker appears intelligent and of good moral character by employing maxims familiar to the audience, building enthymemes with the audience, and generally adapting appeals to the character of the audience (261-262).

Extending Pross' theory, communication scholar Ed Black finds audience adaptation so essential to ethos that he moves criticism beyond the discussion of a speaker's persona into the territory of a "second persona." By his use of the term, ethos no longer refers to the way an audience perceives a speaker, but to the way an audience is led to perceive themselves. In his seminal essay on the topic, Black explains that a "second persona" depicts neither speaker nor audience per se, but the shared identity cultivated between speaker and audience. A successful rhetorician must situate herself and the audience within the ethos that she conveys through discourse. The collaborative relationship between speaker and audience suggested by Black's theoretical understanding of ethos is reflected quite literally in the rhetorical dynamics of mailing list discourse, where the community of readers also collectively produce the texts.

The intelligence, goodwill, and character that finds expression in the ethos of the speaker-audience can be located to a large extent in language. Black expands our understanding of the relationship between language and ethos through his idea of "stylistic tokens," which refers to the terms and fundamental metaphors that embody the worldview of an audience. A successful orator appropriately incorporates the stylistic tokens of the intended audience into her message (112, 119). For example, the stylistic token of "social constructivism" currently resonates with many in American writing centers. It is a term which in part characterizes the rhetorical community of the writing center.

More recently, scholars have argued that the strategic cultivation of ethos does not lie only in identifying and exploiting the tokens that already ostensibly characterize an audience. Rather, as Maurice Charland clarifies in his defining work on constitutive rhetoric, a rhetor can invite an audience to see themselves in a particular way, to identify with a particular vision of what he calls a "peuple," that is in some sense novel. Charland describes the identification of a peuple as a "process of inscribing subjects into ideology" (138), with the very boundary of whom the term peuple includes and excludes being rhetorically constructed (136).
Thus, a rhetor that constitutes an ethos with any particular group both builds on a past terminology and assimilates new conceptual terms. In other words, we may have a group of writing consultants who identify with composition studies, literature, and even the five paragraph AP exam essay. The process of cultivating an ethos with the consultants would involve not only building on stylistic tokens in these areas with which they already identify, but from them, suggesting that the writing center itself is now a reflection of their ethos. Readers are asked to join an author in a text that envisions a new collective ethos for them. In Charland’s terms, we invite them to become peuple of the writing center. In terms that are directly relevant to our own discussion of the ethos of mailing lists, Black and Charland help us get at the process by which a text constitutes a community.

The conception of ethos as constituting an audience is not without some counterpart in the rhetorical theories of composition studies. Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford suggest that

The addressed audience, the actual or intended readers of a discourse, exists outside of the texts. Writers may analyze these readers’ needs, anticipate their biases, even defer to their wishes. But it is only through the text, through language, that writers embody or give life to their conception of the reader. (167)

Ede and Lunsford recognize that audience adaptation falls short of describing the way a rhetor conjures a “vision which they hope readers will actively come to share as they read the text” (167, cf. 160).

Our analysis of the writing center follows Pross (226) and Charland, as well as Ede and Lunsford, in its emphasis on ethos, not as the prior reputation of speaker or audience, but as a new, shared sense of community that is creatively present in a text. We believe that the ethos emerging among participants in the writing center’s online discourse suggests two distinct phases in the process of building virtual community. First, new members of the mailing list acclimatize to their new virtual environment by demonstrating how their own ethos comports with that of the other members. Specifically, members negotiate online to determine who already possesses the expertise and creativity to be a contributing member of the virtual writing center. Once individual membership has been negotiated, the focus of postings shifts to the ethos of the group. In this second phase, members contribute to an ongoing discourse that both affirms and extends the virtual writing center culture through more sophisticated texts.

To explicate these phases of constituting ethos on the mailing list we clarify our model of ethos with two additional constructs used in Harriet Wilkins’ analysis of Usenet discourse, shared cultural knowledge
and validation. She argues that in some cases "to establish the potential coherence of the conversational sequence, participants [have] to have particular cultural, or 'extrasituational,' knowledge" (Wilkins 65, cf. Beach). In other words, the transcript of email exchanges in a Usenet, or mailing list, community will often not make sense unless one shares in the cultural knowledge of the community. In our case, if a consultant claims that she does not want to "pull a Professor X" when she responds to a paper, the dialogue reinforces the experiences of those who have had and understand the flaws of Professor X's method of responding.

Sharing cultural knowledge accounts for one of the ways an audience identifies with the intelligence, character, and goodwill of a speaker, as well as the stylistic tokens present in a text. It is one of the preconditions necessary for discursively creating a peuple. We extend the notion of shared cultural knowledge to include the culture of a peuple or online community that did not exist extrasituationally, but is developed through the text created online.

Finally, to adapt our model to the kind of interactive, overlapping texts of a mailing list, we borrow the concept of "validation," a means by which members ensure that they share in the community's knowledge. Quoting Edmondson's description of validation, Wilkins notes that to validate is to affirm a previous speaker's entry as "a contribution to the ongoing discourse" (Wilkins 67). A participant who appreciates the "pull a Professor X" reference will affirm that member's comment directly by naming her in a compliment or indirectly by incorporating some of that comment into her own posting. Validation serves as a gatekeeper, discouraging participants who lack the cultural knowledge expected of community members, and as a method for valuing new contributions to the culture of the community. As we turn to an analysis of the UAH Writing Center, we find, in the first phase of community, members validating that others already share in the cultural knowledge prerequisite to being a Writing Center consultant. In the second phase, the consultants build their cultural knowledge on the mailing list itself.

Virtual Discourse in the Writing Center: Phase I

As a result of both fiscal and physical constraints at our small university Writing Center, we have come to rely on our in-house email to defer direct cost of consultant development to the university at large and to serve a variety of utilitarian purposes. For example, the mailing list is asynchronous, allowing consultants who work infrequently or who have continual scheduling conflicts to receive information and participate in conversation more often and at their convenience. Second, the mailing list provides a means for instantly distributing information to all employees at once.
While utilitarian needs originally drove our decision to implement this communicative space, we began to observe important cultural formations in the consultants’ email postings suggest theoretical and social merits. Patricia Sullivan and James Porter assert that “emerging workplace communication technologies participate in the theorizing of communication as do the cultures surrounding and being built by communication” (71). The technological medium through which our consultants communicate has indeed become a site that shapes and is shaped by the culture of the writing center community.

The text we will examine consists of 287 postings produced over a period of two consecutive 14-week semesters. The mailing list is powered by the public domain software, SENDMAIL, which is maintained on a Unix server by the staff at Information Services. The participants on the mailing list include four male and ten female members, representing varying levels of experience, status, and posting activity, as described in the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Seniority</th>
<th>Fall Posts</th>
<th>Spring Posts</th>
<th>Total Posts</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>Graduate GTA</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duane</td>
<td>Graduate GTA</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>Graduate Consultant</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>Graduate Consultant</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>Graduate Consultant</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>Senior Consultant</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Junior Consultant</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>Sophomore Consultant</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh O.</td>
<td>Senior Consultant</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracy</td>
<td>Senior Consultant</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh H.</td>
<td>Sophomore Consultant</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sloane</td>
<td>Junior Consultant</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>Faculty Instructor</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dara</td>
<td>Faculty Director</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>142</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>287</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During what we have identified as the first phase of the community, the initiation phase, returning employees establish ground rules for participation. Within a few weeks of virtual conversation, new employees are validated (or not) and returning employees reestablish their positions within the community. The dialogue quickly establishes a particular and very specific set of shared understandings around which the community becomes shaped.

We point to one of the blatant and more interesting examples of first phase negotiations, in which Carmen emerges as the matriarch. Although she only schedules two to three consulting hours a week, she has been employed by the Writing Center significantly longer than any other employee except Chris. Carmen has always taken an active role in the life of the Writing Center, and her postings to the mailing list demonstrate the extent of her involvement. During the year in which this research was conducted, Carmen posted 54 times, constituting almost 19% of the total postings.

Carmen plays a pivotal role as gatekeeper in the early phase of mailing list discussions. She helps establish the boundaries of the virtual Center’s collective ethos by inviting critical discussion and validating only the postings which share appropriately in the Writing Center culture that existed prior to the mailing list. In effect, one of her postings, only the third message distributed to the list, functions as a litmus test of the new employee ethos:

One question I would pose to all writing consultants is similar to the what comes first question...the chicken or the egg...or in writing center concern...the content or the “capitals and dotted I’s.” (I had a consultation today that challenged my beliefs.) And...since the client was bigger than me and since I am basically a coward...I...(right or wrong)...helped her dot the i’s. Feedback?

Carmen’s posting spawns the first critical discursive moment in which group members negotiate their ethos. Strikingly, though understandably, no returning consultants reply to Carmen’s request for advice. They seem to recognize that the established Writing Center community needs no further discussion on this particular matter. The cultural knowledge they possess dictates clearly that global issues take precedence over any grammatical problems that a student might have, and Carmen would, of course, already know that. The answer for them is already embodied in their everyday practice as consultants and writers. Thus, the experienced members of the list do not to respond to Carmen’s post because they tacitly understand Carmen is testing the cultural knowledge of new employees.
Nearly all of the new employees did not seem to recognize the underlying context of Carmen’s question and entered the mailing list to provide the requested feedback. Their initial postings betray insecurities about their membership in the community, a fear that they are interrupting an established conversation. For example, Josh H.’s first posting is a response to Carmen, but not an answer to her question. He posts, “It’s not that I am afraid to talk on this, just haven’t had any worthy input yet. Of course, this isn’t really good input either, but oh well. :)” Carmen does not comment on his apologetic posting, and thus delays his validation within this community.

Josh again sidesteps the question and posts a suggestion for improving the Writing Center web page with a search engine:

Hey,

Just one thought from me. I know that some other sites on the UAH web system have a section that will search their particular site for something, so I think that might be a good idea for the Writing Center page. . . . Just a suggestion that you might consider. Ya’ll agree or have a different opinion on that?

Josh’s posting suggests that he actually does understand the intent and audience of the question. Carmen has asked him and the other new members to contribute to the community. Feeling unable to demonstrate with relevant feedback that his own knowledge comports with that of the established Writing Center community, he instead shows his willingness to contribute by speaking to an issue on which he feels he possesses more credibility. In other words, Josh tries to establish his individual ethos within the mailing list more through goodwill (willingness to help with the work environment of the Center) than through expertise. Or at least he asks for his expertise in Web technologies, a different area, to be assimilated into the cultural knowledge of the Writing Center. Having made his contribution, Josh still overtly seeks validation at the end of the post, asking “Just a suggestion that you might consider. Ya’ll agree or have a different opinion on that?”

Although Carmen again does not immediately respond, this time Josh’s request for acceptance is answered only two postings later by Abby, another outspoken returning consultant. She submits,

I have awakened and will sound my barbaric yowp!! Carmen and Josh—just because I haven’t been responding lexically does not mean I haven’t been sending you mental messages every time I read your always stimulating texts! Thank you both for giving me food for thought whenever I have time to read. . . .
Abby's post marks the beginning of Josh's validation on the mailing list. She explicitly affirms Josh's ethos by claiming that his suggestions have been "food for thought," not just for the Writing Center, but for the mailing list itself. At a more subtle level, Abby literally juxtaposes Josh's name with Carmen's and praises them together in two consecutive sentences. In a sense, Josh's ethos becomes rhetorically linked, at least momentarily, with an already important member of the Writing Center community.

Subsequently, Carmen finally responds to Josh using the same rhetorical finesse by which he had avoided her original question. Rather than overtly acknowledging his request for validation within the Writing Center community, she offers a lesson in consulting that ends with the suggestion, "So...lay all those papers side by side so the client can see progress or lack of progress in their writing. Just a thought! Hope it helps." Carmen does not affirm Josh's consulting expertise, but her implicit invitation into the community reciprocates the goodwill of his earlier posting. On the surface, Carmen offers a specific technique for Josh to employ during consultations, adding to his expertise. On a deeper level, she provides a general model for building expertise by openly collaborating with others in the Writing Center community. Josh can better reflect the ethos of the Writing Center by learning to work side by side with other consultants on the mailing list.

Tracy, another new employee, enters the discussion nearly as cautiously as Josh. She responds to Carmen's test scenario by writing, "I'm just a wee little new person, but I think the content is a tad bit more important." Like Josh, Tracy rhetorically places herself on the margin by adopting a somewhat self-deprecating and tentative style. However, by dubbing herself a "wee little new" consultant, she more openly admits that she must begin at the bottom of the ladder.

Tracy also seems to have reversed Josh's general formula for interpellation into the mailing list narratives. Whereas Josh avoids answering Carmen's question but quite explicitly asks for others to validate his contributions, Tracy directly answers Carmen's question and only implicitly requests validation by hedging her answer with an uncertain tone. Tracy has politely gambled that the philosophy of the Writing Center holds grammar in a subordinate position to rhetorical structure. Carmen confirms Tracy's position almost immediately with a direct invitation to the mailing list community: "Welcome Tracy, wee little new people are always encouraged." Tracy has properly appealed to the expertise of the others in the Writing Center, demonstrating how her ethos corresponds to the collective ethos of the mailing list.

Two other new consultants, Duane and Hannah, enter the ongoing conversation with much more confidence and evoke correspondingly stronger replies, situated at opposite spectrums. Duane makes two attempts to gain concurrence to his view that local corrections take prece-
evidence in consulting. His first posting is literally the first posting of the mailing list:

Dear all,

Welcome back! This is Duane, a new GTA in the Writing Center. The place of grammar in the teaching of writing should be paid much more attention. This does not mean that grammar is everything, but it is really something. I mean, it is just like one of the four legs of a table without which the table would fall. No matter how well-organized and how good the diction is, the whole paper would be lowered if it is full of grammatical problems. . . .

Duane wastes no time conveying his ethos to the group by asserting his philosophy of writing. Duane’s post was likely the impetus for Carmen’s test, signaling that new members do not share the same level of knowledge about the writing and consulting process. We do not attribute special status to Duane’s message as the “first” post. As tasks were routinely divided among the Writing Center GTA’s in an earlier meeting, he had simply volunteered to kick-off the year’s mailing list discussion. More importantly, his message does not ostensibly initiate dialogue on the mailing list. No member directly responds to Duane’s inadvertent step outside the bounds of many contemporary composition theories. Carmen, however, takes the first step of leadership for the group and sets the tempo of discussion by immediately recognizing the need for consultants to demonstrate their understanding of the writing process.

After Carmen posts her question, Duane affirms his previous position by adding the following:

Hi, there!

About the “global issues” and the “local issues” in writing, I do believe they carry the same importance. Yes, it is much more easy to pick up grammar mistakes, but it is also very easy to neglect them. Grammar is not everything, but it is not nothing! I don’t believe any good piece of writing can be seen as a model only by emphasizing the global issues. . . .

Neither of Duane’s postings reflects the extrasituational knowledge of more experienced members in the group, knowledge which is sometimes necessary to establish the coherence of the mailing list conversations. Duane’s later postings do not reflect any change in his position, and tend to be ignored by the other members of the group. Consequently, Duane remains a kind of outsider throughout the year’s virtual dialogue. Abby is
the first to chastise Duane. In the same post where she welcomes Josh into
the community, she flatly remarks about Duane, “Regarding Duane’s
question of Global vs. Local. As far as 003 writers are concerned I have
to disagree. . . .”

Just two postings later, Carmen reinforces Abby’s rejection of
Duane’s position, though in a less direct fashion. She comments, “Of all
the possible responses [to my request for feedback] I had a strong
premonition of what you would write before you wrote.” Somewhere
inside the tone and tucked just behind the lines “of all the possible” lay
Carmen’s expected disappointment. Her “premonition” of Duane’s posi-
tion needs no further articulation, especially as it is strategically joined to
her enthusiastic response to Hannah, the other new graduate teaching
assistant.

Hannah boldly and creatively engages Carmen’s test scenario with
the following poetic lines:

i for one enjoy the richness and texture of entries like these gems;
the macaronic mixture of phrases is like a dense meal with
unfolding flavors: cinnamon, turmeric, brown sugar, chocolate,
roasted lamb, the smoothness of sauces made with a frightening
amount of butter, the sharp unexpectedness of simple salt and
pepper, and the icy sensation of minted tea. There is nothing like
overindulging one’s love of words and the intricate web that is
available for spinning. Saying things simply may not always be
best.;)

Hannah’s poetic style alone challenges the effectiveness of the algorithmic
kind of composition associated with grammar-centered writing
pedagogy. Hannah has not only assured the other members that she shares
in their cultural knowledge, she makes her point with flair. In terms of our
model of ethos building, Hannah has demonstrated to her audience an
appropriate expertise and then made her own contribution to the culture,
extending the ongoing discourse of the mailing list. Carmen finds this
response particularly eloquent and replies, “Hannah, we should put you up
for some kind of literary award.” Carmen validates Hannah’s post by
actually using it to begin a new thread of conversation. The fictional but
symbolically important award for which Hannah has been nominated
becomes a part of the mailing list culture and dialogue. It is alluded to by
several members in future posts.

Virtual Discourse in the Writing Center: Phase II

The virtual space of our Writing Center mailing list proves to be
an important venue for new employees of the Writing Center to develop
their ethos as a member of their working community. Once membership is initially negotiated, however, more emphasis is placed on developing the collective ethos of the virtual Center. During this second phase of the community, participants add to the cultural knowledge of the group in some interesting ways. Initially, the coherence of conversational sequences often depends on members having extrasituational knowledge, experiences outside of the mailing list context such as in classes or with clients in the physical Writing Center. However, the further consultants proceed into the dialogue of the virtual Writing Center, the more conversational sequences seem to depend on an intersituational knowledge of previous postings. During this second phase, beginning just a few weeks into the mailing list discussion and lasting throughout the development of the virtual community, participants appropriate extrasituational events into their postings and then extend the significance and interpretation of these events with subsequent postings. What begins in situations external to the mailing list ends up in dialogue known only internally to the mailing list. These intersituational references form the boundaries of the virtual community. Thus, an important characteristic of this second phase is that most of the energy devoted to the establishment of ethos shifts in focus from the individual to the group. As members move the intrasituational markers forward, they expand the collective ethos of the group, establishing a more distinct peuple within the boundaries of the Writing Center mailing list.

One important manifestation of this Writing Center group’s inward focus is the development of linguistic terms by those participating on the mailing list itself. The new shared language that emerges in this virtual space shapes the collective knowledge and identities of the “people of the virtual writing center.” Some of these terms seem to have simply developed for efficiency, much like chat rooms as a whole have adopted anagrams such as “btw” (by the way) and in “rl” (in real life). In our case, mailing list postings referring to those enrolled in our university’s developmental writing course followed a path of abbreviations beginning with the bulky description, “students enrolled in EH 003,” passing through the shorthand phrase “003 students,” and finally arriving at the economical term “003s.”

Efficiency, however, was not the only exigency for coining terms. Other examples pertain even more closely to our interest in the ethos of both individual members and the group. One serendipitous case was the manner in which participants resolved the difficulty of having two members named Josh. A popular strategy was to link them together with the Latinesque term “Joshi.” To distinguish the Joshi, however, the new consultant, Josh H., became known as “Strange Josh” or ultimately “SJ.” The appellation of SJ was, to the best of our knowledge, a strictly intrasituational phenomenon—originating and recognized only on this
The nickname can be traced to an online comment made by Josh H. himself. He ends a post with “Call me strange! Lol :))” to which Hannah obligingly replies, “Hey Strange Josh (you told us to call you strange...I added the Josh).” Other members validate Hannah's clever response by incorporating it into their own conversations. Abby abbreviates the new convention by remarking “Hey SJ (Strange Josh),” and by the end of the week, Tracy refers to “SJ” without any explanation of the term. The acronym finds itself on 14 different postings, continuing to the end of the Fall term and through the 13th week of the Spring term. Thus, “SJ” becomes not only the alterego of Josh H., but a part of the shared vocabulary that forms the boundaries of the Writing Center virtual community.

“Client backwash,” another linguistic term created in the second phase of this online forum, is an example of the consultants finding in virtual communication a way of interpreting their experiences in the physical writing center. In a posting early in the fall semester, Hannah routinely reminded the consultants to keep their appointments within the 30-minute time limit. She writes,

If your client shows up 5 minutes late that does not mean they get to stay five minutes into the next slot! They lose those 5 minutes. Don't penalize the next client by making them donate 5 minutes of their time. . . .

Zoe finds this post to be an insightful contribution to the mailing list discussion. She affirms, “I’ve been noticing this client backwash as well, but how do you kick 'em out without makin 'em mad.” The phrase “client backwash” creatively describes the scheduling problem. So many members identify with the problem that the phrase becomes a veritable part of the language of the mailing list. It is a token that represents one of the common experiences of the consultants.

In addition to coining particular linguistic terms, the virtual Writing Center expands its culture through broad narratives that define a communication style. In our two final examples of second phase ethos building, events in the physical Writing Center acquire much more significance in virtual space when they are appropriated by narratives on the mailing list. These events, many of which involved only two or three consultants, become part of the group experience, further creating solidarity among participants.

In the first case, we find Carmen working through an especially hectic week, despite her struggle with laryngitis. Abby, one of the few witnesses of the event, writes to all on the mailing list:
After hearing Carmen whisper to her clients yesterday (she has laryngitis) I noticed that the instinct is for them to whisper back. They ask her about her voice and then they concentrate on the writing...seems they don't want to strain her voice so they limit their own sidetracks. Carmen, I think you're on to something! We could all only speak in whispers. It would be like a monastery or convent with relaxed vows of silence. WC could stand for Whispering Consultants.

Carmen’s whispering was a relatively insignificant part of a work-a-day week. Alana’s narrative, however, insightfully speaks to the extrasituational knowledge of all of the consultants, i.e., their clients waste too much time being sidetracked. Her important contribution is validated by others who extend with their posts the image of the whispering consultant. In the most creative of these posts, Hannah announces a meeting in a fully developed whispering style:

...psst...hey guys...there's a meeting tomorrow...Friday, 3-4ish...it's important...there will be guests...please be neat and clean...we want to make a good impression...mla workshop...unlock the mystery that is document citation...ok...shhhhh...the whispering worked for Carmen...so I thought this would get your attention...Hannah...HANNAH!!!!!!! (oops, sorry...uncontrollable urge to shout. . . .)

Unlike our previous examples, this posting does not perpetuate the use of any particular linguistic term that has been coined for sake of efficiency or to better describe the experiences of members. The term “Whispering Consultant” does not become part of the vocabulary of the mailing list. Instead, whispering becomes a style in which members may imaginatively choose to post, with varying features like “shh,” capitalization, ellipses, and so forth. In terms of collective ethos, Abby transforms one member’s isolated bout with laryngitis into a whispering narrative with which all of the other consultants could identify. The whispering style becomes part of the intrasituational knowledge of the mailing list, helping to define the people of the virtual Writing Center.

The second situation occurred serendipitously one afternoon when the Writing Center director returned from a fast food lunch with a cardboard crown. While she was planning to take the crown home to her daughter, consultant Josh H. asked for it and promptly placed it on his head. Without any further fanfare, he turned to finish his consultations for the day. However, the next day the following posting appeared on the mailing list:
To all,

I was crowned King of the Writing Center this evening in a nice little ceremony by Dr. Bell. I even have a lovely crown furnished by the Burger King Corporation!! My first official act as King shall be to declare Wed. the first annual Writing Center Christmas Day!! We shall all have a wonderful time and much celebration!!

Your Noble King,

Josh

This coronation narrative receives immediate validation from the other participants. Duane, as a witness to the original event, requests the title of Earl and Carmen inquires about the position of Queen. In total, 17 subsequent postings occurring all the way to the end of the next semester allude to royalty.

As the conversation about Kings proceeds, the allusions generally become more sophisticated if not more obscure. Josh O. begins a post with “Hear Ye, Hear Ye. The town crier with a message for all Writing Centers.” Later in the semester, Zoe complains of a “royal pain” and Carmen incorporates the word “serfs” into her post. Even in the last few weeks of the virtual community, Tracy refers to “the great and powerful Oz...I mean Josh.” Like the whispering narrative, the royal narrative fosters a kind of medieval rhetorical style, particularly in posts which are addressed directly to Josh H. Those unfamiliar with the original postings about the King will miss the significance of these allusions because they lack the intrasituational knowledge needed to understand the coherence of the conversation. In this way, the medieval style becomes an imaginative addition to the mailing list culture, and creates solidarity among the members.

A Final Note

The virtual Writing Center community examined in this study terminated at the end of the spring semester as the last messages were posted to the mailing list. Much of the physical community of consultants also dispersed. Seniors Josh O. and Tracy successfully graduated from the institution. Likewise, Abby completed her M.A. in English. Duane chose not to return as a graduate assistant, but did complete his degree during the succeeding fall semester. Carmen completed her student teaching requirement the following semester and could not add Writing Center hours to her already full schedule. Jackie continues her studies with the university but
resigned her position with the Writing Center, citing her impending marriage and a daunting academic workload. Amber returned as one of the two graduate assistants assigned to the Writing Center for the subsequent academic year. The remaining consultants also returned for another year of employment in the Writing Center.

While we sketch a theoretical model of building virtual ethos, it is also our intention that this project will stimulate practical thought about the activities of the writing center. We hope that directors will find these descriptions at least a starting place for interpreting communication within their own online ventures. Further study is needed to find whether participation in the virtual center impacts the effectiveness and work time of consultants in the physical center. Additional research might establish whether a correlation exists between ethos developed by participants online and the ethos conveyed by participants in the writing center. Finally, more work is needed to explore the ways virtual writing center activity symbiotically interacts with the physical and symbolic spaces occupied by the writing center within the university community. Further, understanding how these virtual spaces function as a significant part of the rhetorical context of writing centers will provide insight into ways we can better utilize these communicative situations to improve what we do.

Notes

1 Please note that the authors of this essay have printed their names in alphabetical order, not according to their primary or secondary roles in the project. The authors contributed equally to the research, writing and editing phases of this project.

2 The notion of communities forming discursively over interactive digital media has become an increasingly important subject of analysis, as evidenced by scholarly volumes like Steve Jones’ edited series, *CyberSociety*, and popular treatises such as Howard Rheingold’s *Virtual Community*.

3 Kenneth Burke is generally credited as shifting the focus of rhetoric from a speaker’s concern with persuasion to the process of identifying with an audience (cf. 1951; 205). Almost immediately after Burke’s publication of *A Rhetoric of Motives* we find rhetoricians viewing ethos from the perspective of audience.
We have consciously attempted to reproduce the mailing list postings as the students originally composed them, including all grammatical mistakes, unconventional spellings and stylistic faux pas. Because of the sheer number of these "deviations," we do not designate them with a [sic]. Also note that Carmen and others use ellipses in their postings to create the sense of a pause. The ellipses that appear in their posts without the proper spaces represent their symbols for a pause, not our cuts from their texts.

Works Cited


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