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Review: Taking Flight with OWLs

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Inman, James A., and Donna N. Sewell, eds. *Taking Flight with OWLs: Examining Electronic Writing Center Work*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000.

Reviewed by Clinton R. Gardner

During the last few years there has been a growing interest in online writing labs (OWLs). Many conference presentations have been devoted to them, articles have been written, and student readers/rhetorics have begun to make mention of them. While *Wiring the Writing Center* (1998), edited by Eric Hobson, did mention developing online writing labs, the overall purpose of the book was manifold: it emphasized the uses of computer technology in the writing center, and OWLs were just one part of that use. With a few exceptions, the articles in *Taking Flight With OWLs: Examining Electronic Writing Center Work* focus exclusively on studying online writing labs, as opposed to uses of computer technology in the “face to face” writing center.

Inman and Sewell identify that the purpose of *Taking Flight with OWLs* is “to move beyond anecdotal evidence for implementing computer technology in writing centers, presenting carefully considered studies that theorize the move to computer technology and examine technology use in practice” (xix). Such a purpose is useful since, like much writing center work, much of what is written about OWLs is anecdotal, most likely since what we do in writing centers is about sharing experience and understanding how we work in our own contexts. Understandably, we in the writing center community are admonished to move out of purely anecdotal writing and to draw research-based conclusions. It would seem that Inman and Sewell offer a collection that continues the critical conversation about the uses of technology in writing centers started with *Wiring the Writing Center*, providing readers both healthy optimism and healthy skepticism of OWLs. Along the way the collection offers a wide range of experience and useful advice in developing OWLs and the intricacies of operating them.

The collection is divided into five sections that seem to be equally practical (based on strong research) and theoretical. The sections work to first define electronic writing center work and its context, examine individual stories about OWL work, focus directly on synchronous and asynchronous tutoring, and, finally, explore the possibilities of the future of OWL work. The division of the articles into the above sections does represent accurately the state of affairs in OWL studies, in that we seem to fret about what we are doing and about the future of it (the first and last sections), yet need practical discussion of how things are done (the other

three sections).

The first section, “Toward a Definition and Context for Electronic Writing Center Work,” situates the research in the rich context of writing center work. Mark Shadle (“The Spotted OWL: Online Writing Labs as Sites of Diversity, Controversy, and Identity”) and Lady Falls Brown (“OWLs in Theory and Practice: A Director’s Perspective”) investigate the historical context of OWLs, providing their own insights into the development of OWLs based out of that history. Andy Curtis and Tim Roskams (“Language Learning in Networked Writing Labs: A View from Asia”) and Randal L. Beebe and Mary J. Boneville (“The Culture of Technology in the Writing Center: Reinvigorating the Theory-Practice Debate”) strive to offer a definition of OWLs as sites of real inquiry.

The second section provides a space for authors to share their experiences in developing and maintaining OWLs. Sharon Thomas, Mark Hara, and Danielle DeVoss (“Writing in the Electronic Realm: Incorporating a New Medium Into the Work of the Writing Center”), Michael Colpo, Shawn Fullmer, and Brad E. Lucas (“Emerging (Web)Sites for Writing Centers: Practicality, Usage, and Multiple Voices Under Construction”), Eric Miraglia and Joel Norris (“Cyberspace and Sofas: Dialogic Spaces and the Making of an Online Writing Lab”), and finally, Jennifer Jordan-Henley and Barry M. Maid (“Advice to the Linelorn: Crossing State Borders and the Politics of Cyberspace”) all provide unique insight and practical advice into the development of OWL projects. The second section provides the most useful information for people developing and maintaining an OWL since it provides insight from experienced practitioners.

Having provided a context for the varieties of OWLs in the first two sections, the next two sections focus specifically on the two types of writing tutoring offered on OWLs: Asynchronous, or epistolary, and synchronous, or chat-based tutoring. The articles in these sections are based on research from the authors’ own work in electronic tutoring. Both Joanna Castner (“The Asynchronous, Online Writing Session: A Two-way Stab in the Dark?”) and David A. Carlson and Eileen Apperson-Williams (“The Anxieties of Distance: Online Tutors Reflect”) explore the problems of asynchronous tutors, while Mark Mabrito (“E-Mail Tutoring and Apprehensive Writers: What Research Tells Us”) tends to show how effective it can be with student writers who are resistant to tutoring in any form. The synchronous tutoring section, with articles by Jamie Thurber (“Synchronous Internet Tutoring: Bridging the Gap in Distance Education”), Jake Shewmake and Jason Lambert (“The Real(Time) World: Synchronous Communications in the Online Writing Center”), and Joel English (“Putting the OO in MOO: Employing Environmental Interaction”), represent the benefits of real-time tutoring and how to best implement it. The positive spin on real-time tutoring is undoubtedly because most OWLs use asynchronous methods and more

problems have surfaced in that area than have in implemented real-time tutoring. Jane Love (“Ethics, Plugged and Unplugged: the Pedagogy of Disorderly Conduct”) does explore how real-time problematic conduct can affect interactions, but overall puts a positive spin on it by showing that seemingly negative online experiences can have a positive impact by emphasizing student decision making and choice.

The final section, “Looking to the Future,” provides both suggestions for how we can best implement OWLs in the future and a critical view of the current and future status of both online and face to face writing centers. Muriel Harris (“Making Up Tomorrow’s Agenda and Shopping Lists Today: Preparing for Future Technologies in Writing Centers”) offers sound advice about what we should be doing today to get ready for the inevitable dominance of technology in our lives. Gail Cummins (“Centering in the Distance: Writing Centers, Inquiry, and Technology”) and Barbara J. Monroe, Rebecca Rickly, William Condon, and Wayne Butler (“The Near and Distant Futures of OWL and the Writing Center”) investigate how OWLs ultimately affect the community-centered notion of writing centers and how OWLs ultimately promote collaborative learning and collaborative partnerships between students, the community at large, and writing center workers

In perhaps the most hard-hitting article in the book, Eric Crump (“How Many Technoprovocateurs Does It Take to Create Interversity?”) makes the bold statement that OWL work is “stymied” because we writing center folks are stuck in a model of writing center work that cannot be easily transferred to online status: “Those of us who develop online writing environments may be in a . . . [comatose] state: ensconced in a dying system but able to glimpse a new and very different world beyond it” (223). Crump’s article tends to provide a forceful conclusion to *Taking Flight with OWLs* since he forces the issue that the collection necessarily brings up: what OWLs are and how they represent what we do in writing centers. Crump, like the entirety of *Taking Flight*, suggests that “OWLs may play a key role in the future of education . . . ” (230) since education will be very different from how we know it today. In essence, as Crump suggests, we must rethink how we envision OWLs and what they can do: “It’s time to take our collective feet off the brakes so we can get out beyond the well-known world of education and into the world on the other side” (233).

Clint Gardner teaches composition and directs the Writing Center at Salt Lake Community College (SLCC), Salt Lake City, Utah. Long interested in computer mediated communication and its effects on composition and writing centers, Gardner has developed SLCC’s Online Writing Center with his colleagues as a means of fostering the study of composition at SLCC.