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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1527

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The Idea(s) of an Online Writing Center: In Search of a Conceptual Model

by Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch

A while back I was struck by the observations written by a reviewer in The Writing Center Journal regarding The OWL Construction and Maintenance Guide, a CD-ROM with information from various online writing center scholars and practitioners. Mary Wislocki, the author of the review, made this pointed observation: "Just skimming through the CD, I was struck by the unusual mix of texts and seemingly incompatible viewpoints" (71). Later in her review she remarks that "[o]n the other hand, I find the lively hodgepodge of different points of view in The OWL Guide reassuring.... I believe that a multiplicity of voices and opinions—as well as expressions of frustration and enthusiasm—are the healthy sounds of an engaged community talking the emerging field of OWLs into existence" (74).

I too felt reassured—by her review, that is. In my own experience as a director of an online writing center, I have found that OWLs have vastly different purposes from one to the next. I have often wondered if I was the only one who noticed that online writing centers, unlike face-to-face centers, don’t share a common model. Why do so many versions of online writing centers exist? And how are students supposed to know how to use them? Wislocki refers to the variety of online writing centers in her brief review, but a quick Google search would also do the trick. There are so many kinds of online writing centers that they can now be categorized. As Jane Lasarenko reports, online writing centers come in various shapes and sizes that serve different purposes. She likens these differences to rungs on a ladder; those on the lower rungs offer minimal services, whereas the higher rungs provide a more complete range of writing center services. For example, she suggests that some online writing centers (on the lower
only consist of web sites that advertise their face-to-face writing-center services. On a higher rung, online writing centers may announce a service and also provide online resources. On still a higher rung, online writing centers may provide some form of online tutoring. Mark Shadle likewise explains that some online writing centers are simply counterparts of a face-to-face service, while others exist only online (8). The bottom line is that online writing centers vary significantly from one to the next.

Although the variety is exhilarating, it is also frustrating for online writing center administrators and designers who may be seeking effective models to follow. In addition, online writing centers have to juggle the complexities introduced by online tutoring: the increased potential for directive tutoring instead of nondirective tutoring (perhaps breaking the writing center "codes" of behavior, described by Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns as part of the "writing center bible"), the lack of sustained dialogue in asynchronous tutorials, and the technological problems of accessibility and compatibility.

The complexities introduced by online writing centers have gotten me thinking about conceptual models and how they operate in online environments. Specifically, I have been thinking about how a strong conceptual model is integral to any design. As Donald Norman explains in The Design of Everyday Things, "A good conceptual model allows us to predict the effects of our actions" (13). Norman explains that conceptual models help us understand the way things are supposed to work as well as provide explanations for when things don't work (14). In the remainder of this article, I discuss how examining conceptual models more closely—particularly in relation to online writing centers—might be very useful in making sense of the array and seeming inconsistency of online writing centers.

Ultimately I suggest that the most powerful "Idea" or conceptual model of writing center work, which I believe is the "Burkean Parlor," is difficult to express online. Online environments require strong conceptual models that help users understand how to interact with the website, and instead of directly invoking the "Burkean Parlor" metaphor, many online writing centers invoke what appear to be simpler conceptual models in the form of distinct metaphors like "studio" or "café" or even "garden" that tend to be more concrete. The result is an array of metaphors used for online writing centers that might contribute to a sense of disparity and even disappointment in online writing centers as a whole. But my argument is that conceptual models play a very important part in online writing center design because they guide students, faculty, and staff members through the online experience. Such guidance is necessary.

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for online writing center designs vary due to technologies and resources they have available to them. Unlike face-to-face writing centers, where the media are consistent (people meet in a physical place and talk), there are many ways to foster dialogue online. Consequently, online writing centers must effectively create their own conceptual models that make sense for the technologies and resources they have available to them. There are many "Ideas" of an online writing center, and these Ideas can be made even more effective by embracing a strong, concrete conceptual model.

**Conceptual Models**

In order to more fully outline my argument, I must first define what I mean by a "conceptual model," for understanding this term is critical to the design(s) of online writing centers. As I mentioned earlier, conceptual models can be described as a mental map of sorts for understanding how to use a product or to interact with an interface. As many scholars in human factors, usability, and technical communication suggest, conceptual models play an especially important role in software and Internet design (Johnson; Norman; Rubin). The virtuality of online communication necessitates mental models or maps, since so often we cannot tangibly touch or see the objects with which we interact. Simply put, conceptual models help us consider our experiences with new technologies by linking to our previous experiences. Often, conceptual models are stated in terms of metaphor: "This object works like a [blank]." Patrick Lynch and Sarah Horton explain: "Users of web documents don’t just look at information, they interact with it in novel ways....The graphic user interface (GUI) of a computer system comprises the interaction metaphors, images, and concepts used to convey function and meaning on the computer screen" (11). The icon of a trash can on a personal computer interface is an example of a metaphor used to convey a conceptual model. To explain the trash can, we might say that "deleting files works like a trash can: to discard files, we put them into the trash can, much as we would discard garbage into a trash can." Another example is the metaphor of a shopping cart, used by Amazon.com as well as a host of e-commerce sites. Although shopping is done online, the icon of a shopping cart helps users understand that they can place items they would like to purchase into their virtual shopping cart. Many e-commerce sites also use language such as "check out" to reinforce the conceptual model of shopping in a physical space. Conceptual models like these are successful because they exploit that which is familiar (e.g., a shopping cart), and they use this familiarity to introduce newer models.

The idea here is not much different from shifts in genre that occur when new media are introduced. In a discussion of blogs (or weblogs) as a new media in writing instruc-
tions, Kevin Brooks, Cindy Nichols, and Sybil Priebe make the point succinctly: "One of the fundamental principles of new media that directly influenced our teaching and research is the principle that old media and familiar genres end up as the content of new media." Citing principles such as the "law of retrieval" (McLuhan and McLuhan) and "remediation" (Bolter and Grusin), they explain,

The web is remediating all media that has come before it (print, music, film, television, radio, paintings, email, etc.); therefore in our teaching we wanted to emphasize for our students that weblogging is not a radically new way of writing, but a repurposing of familiar (we hoped) print genres.

We might consider this wisdom in terms of online writing centers, for online writing centers present a new form of media for writing center work: online resources, synchronous (real-time) tutoring, such as interactive chats, and asynchronous (delayed-time) tutoring, such as e-mail tutoring. Are online writing centers a radical new way of conducting writing center work, or just a repurposing of the familiar?

For now, the point I want to make is that conceptual models and metaphors are powerful tools that help us bridge the familiar with the new, and the tendency to search for familiar conceptual models is often an automatic impulse. I am reminded of a recent discussion with colleagues about using blogs in the classroom, in which as a group we generated a barrage of metaphors to better understand blogs. "Are blogs like a journal? Like a discussion board? Like a listserv?" As we try to understand new media, our tendency to search for familiar experiences is quite natural. A colleague of mine shared another story that aptly illustrates how powerful conceptual models can be when interacting with new technology. She had been working with a man who was used to using computers without a mouse—he used only keystrokes on the computer keyboard. One day, she gave him a computer mouse, thinking that it would help him use the computer more efficiently. But he had never seen a mouse and did not know how to use it. When she gave him the mouse, he lifted the mouse, pointed it toward the computer screen, and began pressing the buttons on the mouse. Clearly, this man thought the mouse worked like a remote control. This story illustrates how previous conceptual models might govern our understanding of how to use technology that is new to us. We experiment until we find a conceptual model that does work.

Strong conceptual models help users because they keep the users' goals in mind. But, as Norman argues throughout The Design of Everyday Things, not all designs are structured around a strong conceptual model that benefits the users. Have you ever seen a great looking product but have no idea how to use it? More to the point, have you

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ever seen an online writing center but have no idea how to use it? Sometimes, designers may eschew a conceptual model in favor of other goals—aesthetics, for example may win out over the practicality of user goals. The result might be that conceptual models of users are neglected, and that is when users have difficulty understanding how to use a particular program, service, or product. In making sense of such lapses, Norman suggests that the end goal is for the conceptual models of designers and users to match (16). Robert Johnson goes one step further by advocating that designers take user practices into consideration when designing a system, whatever that system might be (197). Such approaches are similar to “participatory design” approaches in which user groups are included in all design phases of a product. Through focus groups and observation of users interacting with an interface, designers can see how well their conceptual model is shared with the target user.

I believe there are three critical principles associated with conceptual models that can help guide us in further understanding online writing centers. The first is that users always have conceptual models of how things work—whether or not we are conscious of these models. In the case of online writing centers, for example, we might already have a conceptual model in mind of how the online writing center might work, and it might be based on what we know—face-to-face tutoring. A second point is that frustration may arise when our attempts to apply a conceptual model do not work. Again, in the case of online writing centers, we think of the frustration that might result when we try to apply the conceptual model of a face-to-face tutorial to online tutoring—the result might be disappointment that the online tutorial doesn’t fulfill our expectations. A third point is that new technology invites us to reconsider our previous conceptual models—to “remediate” them in a sense. In terms of online writing centers, we may need to think about the ways in which the web repurposes, but does not replace, work in a physical writing center.

In the sections below, I address these three points to the “Ideas” of an online writing center. First, I examine dominant conceptual models present in writing center scholarship that may create expectations for online writing centers. Second, I discuss the frustration that might arise when our “Idea” or dominant conceptual model of a writing center clashes with what is realistic in an online environment. Finally, I explore ways that new conceptual models might be developed to accommodate the many strengths online writing centers can offer.
Conceptual Models Are Always Present

Although the term "conceptual model" may not surface in writing center discussions, its idea is very present in scholarship. Perhaps the most powerful conceptual models emerge in reference to "the idea of a writing center." I’d like to highlight three works here: Stephen North’s article "The Idea of a Writing Center"; Andrea Lunsford’s article "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center"; and David Coogan’s book Electronic Writing Centers—all of which grapple with an ideal conceptual model of a writing center. In all of the discussions, metaphors emerge that have remained powerful in writing center discourse and that have played a part in shaping expectations of what online writing centers can (or should be able to) do.

First, let me address Stephen North’s "The Idea of a Writing Center," which arguably has shaped the image, theory, and practice of writing centers as we know them today. Although I have read this article too many times to count (as probably many readers of this article have as well), when I examined it under a new lens, it occurred to me that conceptual modeling was at the very heart of this article. North clearly calls for a "paradigm shift" between what he refers to as the "old" and "new" writing center (29). This movement shares similarities with the shift that occurs between old and new media, when conceptual models play a pivotal role. As North advocates for a student-centered, process-centered approach to tutoring, he asserts

[w]hereas in the "old" center instruction tends to take place after or apart from writing, and tends to focus on the correction of textual problems, in the "new" center the teaching takes place as much as possible during writing, during the activity being learned, and tends to focus on the activity itself. (29)

North even directly references metaphor in his discussion of conceptual models to further describe the difference between "old" and "new" writing centers, specifically highlighting metaphors that he deems incorrect or misleading. The most powerful is the "fix-it shop" metaphor—the idea that students expect tutors to correct their papers. He also reviews metaphors such as "first aid" stations that "treat symptoms" (27). In response to these models, which he of course rejects, North proposes what he calls the analogy of "participant-observation," in which tutors observe and work with students in the process of writing (28). The language of metaphor and analogy here have been powerful in shaping the discourse of writing center theory and practice. North effectively advanced process- and student-centered pedagogy in the writing center, the mission of which, in his words, "is to produce better writers, not better writing" (27). North’s discussion and his explicit address of metaphors and analogies
made a powerful mark on writing center theory and practice, setting the foundation for a conceptual model that writing centers still refer to today: a participant-observer model in which tutors work with students to improve as writers.

Andrea Lunsford builds on this conceptual model by suggesting a "Burkean Parlor" for writing centers that values collaboration and dissensus (40). She advocates the Burkean Parlor model over two other models: the "Storehouse Center," which serves as a resource center where students can find "answers" to their writing problems, and the "Garret Center" that "help[s] students get in touch with [their interior knowledge], as a way to find their unique voices, their individual and unique powers" (38). She further supports the Burkean Parlor model in connection with collaborative theory:

The idea of a center I want to advocate speaks directly to these needs, for its theory of knowledge is based not on positivist principles (that's The Storehouse again), not on Platonic or absolutist ideals (that's The Garret), but on the notion of knowledge as always contextually bound, as always socially constructed. (41)

Although Lunsford advocates the Burkean Parlor, she is also cautious about it, noting the complexities of collaborative writing in writing center practice. Nevertheless, Lunsford’s conceptual model of the Burkean Parlor has been a powerful metaphor for writing center work because of the balance it strikes between tutor and student responsibilities in the writing center—the idea of working together, constructing knowledge and "valuing dissensus and diversity" (41).

In fact, I would argue that Lunsford’s Burkean Parlor metaphor has become the dominant conceptual model for writing center theory and practice. The model captures the complexities of tutor-student work, and it presents a vision of a service that encourages the development of students as writers. Combined with North’s vision of a writing center, the Burkean Parlor is recognized among many writing center practitioners as the ideal for which to strive. A glance at most writing center promotional materials reflects language associated with Burkean Parlor and the participant-observer analogy. For example, in a random search of the IWCA web list of writing centers, I found language similar to the following quote from Arizona State University Writing Center:

Writing Center tutors do not proofread or edit drafts of papers. Instead, tutors assist students in developing, improving, and refining their papers. ...Rather than simply telling a student what is "wrong" or "right" with a paper, the tutors adhere to a "joint inquiry" method of tutoring—a Socratic-style method of question and answer. In addition to offering
specific advice concerning the student’s essay, the tutor asks students questions in order to help them recognize, articulate and address their own writing difficulties. In the Writing Center, tutors and students work very closely together toward common goals: increasing the student’s confidence as a writer, and improving the student’s writing skills.

Does this language sound familiar? The sentence “writing centers do not proofread or edit drafts of papers” reflects North’s rejection of the “fix-it shop.” The description of “joint inquiry” method reflects Lunsford’s vision of the Burkean center, where student and tutor work together in a collaborative fashion. The language found in Arizona State University’s site is very similar to many writing center philosophy statements. I believe such language reflects an acceptance of the dominant conceptual model of the Burkean Parlor.

Not surprisingly, the Burkean Parlor has emerged as the ideal for online writing centers as well. In Electronic Writing Centers, David Coogan explicitly invokes the Burkean Parlor metaphor: “[T]he idea of an electronic writing center is, at this point, just an idea for dialogizing the scene of college writing; to begin using the Internet to invite other student voices into our conferences; to create what Andrea Lunsford (1991) calls a ‘Burkean parlor center’ online” (91). The Burkean Parlor metaphor fits nicely with Coogan’s argument that online writing centers can be models of dialogic pedagogy, or, in his words “a move toward dialogic literacy that knows no boundaries between disciplines, geography, time, and levels of education” (109). He suggests that online writing centers should be more substantial, more of a single stop in which students not only exchange their drafts but review relevant resources about the topics on which they are writing—almost like writing-across-the-disciplines. In advocating this vision for electronic writing centers, Coogan suggests: “I imagine a day...when students can quote other students as they write, connecting their work not just to their professor or classmates but to those writers that have engaged the same subjects, at different times, in different places, in dissimilar conditions” (109).

All of this is to say that conceptual models are always present, whether or not we are aware of them. In this case, I believe the discussions by North and Lunsford in particular have been extremely powerful in shaping a common vision—a conceptual model, if you will—for how and what writing centers do. For both face-to-face and online centers, the Burkean Parlor model seems to be the ideal because it captures the complexities and richness of writing center work.
Conceptual Models Do Not Always Work

While conceptual models are always present, users get frustrated when their conceptual models do not apply to the situation/product at hand. We might recall the story of the man who used the computer mouse like a remote control. Imagine the frustration he must have experienced when the conceptual model of the remote (that which was familiar) did not apply to the situation at hand (that which was new). Perhaps the reader can now imagine where I am going with this argument in terms of online writing centers: if the Burkean Parlor is the dominant model for writing centers (including online centers), there may be frustration and disappointment when the model is not realized in online environments. This is precisely where I believe online writing centers are in this point in time: struggling, yet not fulfilling the Burkean Parlor model as it has been expressed in literature, particularly in terms of place and tutor-student behaviors. Let me address each of these areas.

One way in which users might experience frustration with online writing centers is the less-than-impressive attempts to mirror a face-to-face tutoring environment online. The Burkean Parlor model has the obvious suggestion of a gathering spot or physical place (a parlor), an idea that is well established in writing center literature. For example, Muriel Harris suggests that most physical writing centers labor to create a warm, inviting physical space, complete with coffee pots and candy dishes to welcome students. She paints a picture of a place with hanging plants and comfortable couches—a place that students would want to go, she argues (“Using Computers” 7). There is no denying that place is altered dramatically when we talk about online writing centers. In virtual environments, place becomes translated into space, or online spaces in which certain activities occur. In keeping with the idea of place, many online writing centers have tried to recreate aspects of writing centers as we know them in physical environments. For example, some online writing centers have "rooms" (represented by individual links) where students can "go" to find certain resources or online conversations; some online writing centers have even put images of couches on their web sites to make the centers seem more homey (see Figure 1).

Others may refer to place through metaphor. For example, Eric Miraglia and Joel Norris use spatial metaphors to describe how they seek to theorize a dialogic space for their online writing center:

1. Architecture and Carpentry. A dialogue between those theorizing the space, practiced in the pedagogy and disclosure of the proximal writing lab, and those who will build the space, whose expertise lies in theorizing the internal elegance of the system and its interface.
2. Cyberspace and Sofas. An ongoing, increasingly rich dialogue between tutors about student-client writing in the OWL, one that helps invigorate the proximal lab in addition to supporting the online pedagogical work. (87)

Whether used in a metaphorical or more literal fashion, many online writing centers have borrowed the concepts of a writing center place to define their online presence, but most of the time it just isn’t the same. Online, students are limited to what they can see and hear from a computer screen, so if students go online holding the same expectations of place for online writing centers as they do face-to-face writing centers (like sitting on a sofa rather than just looking at one), they will likely be disappointed. It is for these reasons that some scholars have suggested that online tutoring—particularly asynchronous or email tutoring—falls short of achieving this warm, inviting environment. (Harris has suggested that email tutoring was “cold” in comparison to face-to-face environments ["Using Computers" 7]).

Another way frustration with online writing centers might occur is the way in which tutor-student behaviors are enacted online. Certainly, the Burkean Parlor model affirms conversation and dialogue in a writing center, especially in a nondirective,
rather than directive stance, and in a way that encourages students to develop as writers. Several scholarly works have affirmed this expectation for tutor-student behavior. For example, works like *Talking about Writing* (Clark) and *Teaching One-to-One* (Harris) reinforce conferencing in environments like writing centers and assert the importance of creating a safe learning environment for student writers. Some scholars even outline dialogue strategies that tutors can follow (Harris, *Teaching One-to-One*; Powers and Nelson; Reigstad and McAndrew). These strategies ultimately shape the role of tutor as coach, guide, or, as Clark suggests, even Peace Corps workers "who seek to make themselves dispensable, by helping their hosts to help themselves" (5).

Subsequent work further supports this idea of a writing center to the point that, as Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns point out in "A Critique of Pure Tutoring," nondirective, conversational tutor behaviors formed what they call the "writing center bible:"

This bible contains not only the material evidence to support student-centered, non-directive practices, but also codes of behavior and statements of value that sanction tutors as a certain kind of professional, one who cares about writing and about students, their authentic voices, and their equal access to the opportunities within sometimes difficult institutions. (135)

These tutor-student behaviors are so well established in writing center theory that, as Shamoon and Burns suggest, they have become a code of practice; however, they don't apply very well online because they are grounded in oral communication. When writing centers go online, there may be immediate frustration because we cannot apply what we know (our oral communication practices) as easily, quickly, or as well in the online environment. We must alter our tutor practices to fit written communication. For example, Barbara Monroe suggests a comment structure that includes "front notes," "intertextual notes," and "end notes" for asynchronous tutoring sessions. Although she suggests that tutors can try to foster the same kind of interpersonal connections in online tutorials as face-to-face, she acknowledges the limitations of written communication to do so. Thus, online tutoring might feel abnormal to us because the same kind of nondirective, conversational, and reflective listening behaviors we know so well don't apply as easily to online writing centers. Some may argue that online tutoring goes much against the idea of a writing center—the idea of Burkean Parlors, of ongoing conversation, even of knowing one another's names (because online tutoring may occur anonymously). Consider Scott Russell's response:
The very nature of the computer screen—so like a television—calls attention to our move away from the direct human interaction that has defined our success as writing center tutors. It is important that we reconsider, in light of this trend, the human mechanics that allow for real connections in a tutorial, that we break a pattern that may have already formed instead of continuing to expand it within the new mediums that confront us. (72)

Similar criticisms include the concern that online tutoring may not foster student understanding of complex concepts the tutor is trying to convey (Baker) and also that tutoring online may not sufficiently address the ethical complexities of tutoring (Spooner).

There is less of a schism when we consider synchronous tutoring, for tutor and student can at least “meet” in cyberspace and have an ongoing dialogue about writing. They may know each others’ names and may “talk” freely online. Eric Crump suggests that synchronous tutoring offers many benefits for writing centers, such as increased writing practice but also the ability to capture tutoring discussions. He suggests that synchronous tutoring offers the best of both worlds, in a sense, for tutor and student can actively discuss things online and yet both must articulate their contributions in writing. Synchronous tutoring is perhaps more promising in the eyes of most writing center scholars because it is closer to the conceptual model of writing centers that has survived so strongly in writing center literature.

Yet in all of these examples, we are beginning to see that online writing centers have differences from face-to-face writing centers. For example, Rebecca Rickly suggests that although face-to-face and online tutoring share some things in common, they are not exactly the same activity:

We began to question our initial assumption that f2f tutoring and online tutoring were the same: in fact, initially the pendulum swung a bit too far in the opposite direction, and we concluded that f2f and online tutoring were completely different. Yet after one more semester of refining our integration of online and f2f training, we drew in to the center, seeing online and f2f tutoring as cousins who shared many familial traits, but who nonetheless needed to be treated as individuals. (58–59)

At the heart of these accounts is, I believe, a tension between the expectation that online writing centers should fulfill the Burkan Parlor model in the same way face-to-face writing centers do, and the realization that online writing centers require their own approach. The tension is disruptive. In response, I argue that the Burkan Parlor model needs to be repurposed to better fit online environments, for it does not tangi-
bly address the new ways tutors and students need to behave in online environments. This repurposing may mean that the language of the Burkean Parlor gets translated differently, perhaps in more tangible, recognizable metaphors and conceptual models, to help users understand how to use their sites.

In the next section, I suggest that online writing centers need the freedom to focus on developing contextually-appropriate conceptual models, ones unique to their individual institutions with the capability of repurposing writing center work online; consequently, I am suggesting that we consider multiple ideas of an online writing center rather than one conceptual model or ideal. Although these models may resemble, in part, our understanding of the Idea of a writing center and the Burkean Parlor, they may also expand it to accommodate the growing potential of online writing centers.

**Conceptual Models Reconsidered**

New technology invites us to reconsider our previous conceptual models. This third principle of conceptual models might prove to be the most helpful—but perhaps the most difficult—as we consider the future of online writing centers. This principle is difficult because it requires us to move into new territory beyond our familiar conceptual model. As I have argued throughout, the Burkean Parlor model is the dominant model for physical writing centers, and this model has also been held up as the ideal for online writing centers. In the previous section I suggested that online writing centers should not be expected to carry out the Burkean Parlor model in exactly the same ways as face-to-face centers because technology adds another layer of complexity to writing center work. Instead, we may need to make room for other conceptual models that more tangibly connect the Burkean Parlor to online environments. Expanding writing center work in this way might mean also expanding our ideas of what online writing centers can do.

Good examples of strong conceptual models in online writing centers modify the Burkean Parlor to better suit the online environment. I’d like to highlight two examples here because they share an effective set of characteristics (which I detail later) that make their models especially strong.

The first is University of Missouri-Columbia’s “Online Writery” (<http://www.missouri.edu/~writery>), which seems to be built around the conceptual model of a café. Figure 2 below shows the image that appears on the home page.

The coffee cup and language (“Please wait one moment, we’ll be right with you…”) indicates a café, but what is even more impressive is the sound and movie that accompany this page. In the background, one hears the sound of people talking, much like
you would experience in a café. The page then goes into a movie that flashes words describing the complexity of writing. After the movie is completed, users are directed to click on a link to the “Online Writeiy,” which is the true index for the online writing center site. On that page, the logo of the Online Writeiy appears along with the language “Welcome! Feel free to relax, have a cup of java, and browse around the Online Writeiy to see what we have to offer.” This language further reinforces the café model but joins the model to the online environment. (“Have a cup of java” is a nice play on words here.) Further into the site, a student will find a description of their three primary services: cybertutorials, which are asynchronous tutorials in which tutors provide comments on student writing; the writeiy café, which is a discussion list people can join to discuss issues of writing; and face-to-face tutoring.

One of the powerful things about this conceptual model is the way it combines images, sounds, and information about writing in a way that creates a strong sense of purpose and environment. But in doing so it is not trying to mimic the physical environment of a face-to-face writing center; rather, it combines media to create its own cybercafé. In its own way, it invokes the Burkean Parlor model—the idea of conversation, of writing process, of working with others. The café provides a very useful and engaging conceptual model that guides users through their online experience. And,
the conceptual model is uniquely suited to the services it provides, which revolve around tutor and student interactions.

Another strong example of a conceptual model in an online writing center is Colorado State's "Writing Studio" <http://writing.colostate.edu/studio/about.cfm>. The word "studio" alone conjures images of a place where people work on projects and get feedback from others—a very appropriate metaphor for writing center work. The web site provides further description of the Writing Studio, invoking the metaphor of a "workshop": "The Writing Studio is designed to help you as you write. Our goal is to provide an experience similar to a well-run workshop—timely advice from teachers, feedback from other writers, helpful examples and demonstrations, and access to tools that can help you write effectively for varied audiences and occasions."

As Figure 3 shows, the Writing Studio appears to be connected to specific classes as well as a campus-wide electronic portfolio system. Students can post writing to their portfolio where other students and faculty could have access and provide feedback. There are even plans to build "a suite of rooms" within the studio for specific disciplines or classes that can be designed to accommodate different needs (chats, web

Figure 3. Colorado State University's "Writing Studio"
board discussions, etc.). The rooms can even be built to collaborate with other universities.

The Writing Studio is a great example of how a strong conceptual model can be expressed differently from the Burkean Parlor model, still incorporate some of the same principles, and even go beyond the possibilities of a face-to-face center. The Writing Studio provides a place that locates these exciting new ways that students can get feedback from others about their writing and join a writing community. In many ways, the Writing Studio resembles Coogan's vision of an electronic writing center that "expands the concept of audience, deprivatizes the writing tutorial, and makes innovative use of other students' writings" (86). And, like the café model, the conceptual model of the "Writing Studio" is unique to this center's purpose and technologies. I predict we will see more of these unique conceptual models spring up as online writing centers continue to thrive and evolve, and as we continue to discover the many exciting possibilities for online writing centers.

Of course, there are many good examples of conceptual models in online writing centers—too many to address here. I chose these two examples because they have some characteristics in common that make their conceptual models particularly strong. First, they do not deviate too far from the Burkean Parlor model in a way that, say, a "Storehouse" online model might (one that simply offers online resources). The café and studio models are similar to the Burkean Parlor in that they suggest community, interaction, and exchange of writing, but they do so in their own unique ways. Second, these two models are similar in that they suggest a place or environment for online writing center work that may help users "locate" their services. What I like about their "locations" is that they do not limit themselves to the physical space of a face-to-face writing center. Rather, the metaphors of café and studio help us think beyond that space and toward the possibilities that technology affords. A third common characteristic these conceptual models share is that their guiding metaphors suggest activities that might be expected in those environments: In a café, we would expect to chat with others (asynchronously or synchronously). In a studio, we might expect to showcase our work (have some place to "post" our work) and get substantial feedback on that work (synchronously or asynchronously from a variety of audiences). When conceptual models provide guidance for expected activities, users are likely to be more satisfied and comfortable in that environment.

The point of these examples is to say that, as new media become available to us, we may need to find ways of shaping expectations and providing guidance for how to effectively use those media. Doing so takes careful thought and planning, but can
result in innovative online writing centers that push our theory and practice in positive ways.

The Future of Online Writing Centers

In closing, I’d like to say that conceptual models can be very useful as we consider the future of online writing centers. While the Burkean Parlor is still the dominant conceptual model for writing center work, there are many ways to express it online. Understanding this fact may help us make sense of the many forms and varieties of online writing centers that currently exist. As online writing centers continue to evolve (as all online interfaces do), it may be helpful to shape online writing centers around strong conceptual models that do four things: (1) maintain the many values upheld by the Burkean Parlor model; (2) provide a sense of place or environment (not necessarily connected to a face-to-face writing center); (3) provide guidance for expected online activities to help guide users; and (4) reflect the unique combination of goals and technologies of a particular institution. As we search for conceptual models, I welcome the many ideas of an online writing center that may emerge.

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