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Review: *The OWL Construction and Maintenance Guide*

Inman, James A., and Clinton Gardner, eds.

Emmitsburg, MD: International Writing Centers Association Press, 2002.

by Mary Wislocki

Technology makes many colleagues uncomfortable

--James A. Inman and Clinton Gardner

Literacy "piles up" Rapid changes in literacy and education may not so much bring rupture from the past as they bring an accumulation of different and proliferating pasts, a piling up of literate artifacts and signifying practices that haunt the sites of literacy learning. (665)

--Deborah Brandt

I first read James A. Inman and Clinton Gardner's new *The OWL Construction and Maintenance Guide* CD-ROM as I believe many writing center professionals will, quickly and eagerly, trying to get the hang of using a CD, looking for good advice to help me understand and evaluate my own Online Writing Lab (OWL). Like many writing center directors, I had found that developing my OWL was a complicated business, especially since it seemed to challenge rather than reinforce well-worn writing center practices and values. By the time I got to *The OWL Guide*, I had read a few books and acquired a folder bulging with OWL articles downloaded from the Internet. I wanted more, and *The OWL Guide* seemed just the thing. But I soon found that if this CD is a guidebook, it's not like any I'd ever encountered before. One way to characterize the difference would be to tweak the title and make it plural: *The OWL Guides*. Or, consider how Inman and Gardner forewarn us in the *Introduction*: "*The OWL Guide* is a challenging read, asking you to synthesize the range of contributions . . ." Just skimming through the CD, I was struck by the unusual mix of texts and seemingly incompatible viewpoints. *The OWL*

About the Author

Mary A. Wislocki is the director of the Writing Center at New York University. She also teaches first-year writing courses, coordinates the university writing proficiency exam, and co-directs the first-year writing course for the Steinhardt School of Education. She has published articles in *The Writing Lab Newsletter*.

Guide includes full-fledged academic articles and an annotated bibliography, as well as excerpts from syllabi with links to Internet sites, several checklists that outline how to plan and run an OWL, and other "primary materials." It includes assertions that OWLs require careful research and planning (James A. Inman) as well as a report that advocates the success of a "learning as we grow" approach (Muriel Harris); it contains research that grapples with persistent questions about OWL tutoring practices (Roberta Buck and Dave Shumway), as well as a review that affirms that OWLs are "more likely to be thought of as an intelligent and usable partner in delivering the best possible assistance to writers" (Josephine A. Koster). Read in a rush, *The OWL Guide* appeared uneven and bewildering; it also seemed timely, important and strangely reassuring.

Now, some months later, I've had a chance to think about the significance of this thin little disk, and I'm increasingly impressed. Most obviously, *The OWL Guide* operates at a pragmatic point of need for writing center professionals: the 30 selections by new and widely published OWL practitioners offer the latest advice, models and research on many aspects of OWL design and maintenance. Yet clearly this CD is radically different from the edited volumes of research that are a staple of academic life. Inman knows how to do that work when he wants to: he and Donna Sewell co-edited an earlier book on the same subject, *Taking Flight with OWLs*. But in this venture, Inman and Gardner have created a new genre that I'm just beginning to understand: it's a digital repository of all kinds of academic materials that overlap and disagree, a work-in-progress that the editors are even now morphing into another version on the web. What I can say for sure is that *The OWL Guide* is a fascinating example of how technology is not only transforming writing centers, but also the texts that discuss them. In particular, *The OWL Guide* seems to represent a dynamic new genre that both recalls and subverts the familiar, exactly the predicament we find ourselves facing with OWLs. My aim in this review is not to minimize the discomfort that accompanies the development of OWLs or this new genre, but to explicitly acknowledge the literacy practices that "haunt" *The OWL Guide*. In this way, writing center practitioners can begin a conversation about what really matters to us in CD or web-based compilations about writing centers.

The two bookend sections, part one, *Contemporary OWLs*, and part four, *OWL Bibliography*, contain articles that sketch the shape of the field from a variety of vantage points: they include reviews of OWL models, history, theory and research. *Contemporary OWLs* begins with three substantial articles by well-known writing center directors. Readers of the writing center listserv, WCenter, will be familiar with

Josephine A. Koster's virtual tour of writing centers that she offers periodically to subscribers. In this elaborated version, "Bits, Bytes, and Baker's Dozens: A Virtual Tour of OWL Space," Koster again provides links to exemplary websites but, for the first time, demonstrates how she reads and evaluates them. Next, Muriel Harris recounts the modest beginnings of her stunningly successful OWL in "The Development of an OWL: Learning as We Grow," and adds frequent commentary on her experience through "BOA," or "bits of advice." She introduces two recurring themes in *The OWL Guide*: the frequent administrative and technical difficulties facing OWL directors and the importance of TA's in developing and maintaining OWLs. While the Purdue OWL continues to be the model for online writing resources, Harris remains unconvinced of the "pedagogical effectiveness" of online tutoring. Beth Hewett's article, "Theoretical Underpinnings of Online Writing Labs (OWLs)," provides a methodical and comprehensive survey of the writing theories that seem particularly relevant to OWLs. Unlike Harris, Hewett believes that online tutoring provides a "complementary" service to face-to-face tutoring. She argues that OWLs can "revitalize" their traditional "parent" writing centers through a relationship that is both "hierarchical" and "symbiotic."

The other five articles in this section describe OWLs designed for specific disciplines and contexts, but they also provide useful advice that is not limited to their particular institutional contexts. For instance, in "A Discipline-Specific OWL for Psychology," Patricia Loesche presents an articulate rationale for all many of OWLs, as well as useful principles for web design. Sherri Winans' article, "What Do We Believe Now? Constructing a Community College OWL," recounts how, despite generous funding and release-time, she encounters serious setbacks. Winans is both "dismayed" and "challenged" by how far the field is advancing ahead of her because of the limited material conditions of her community college.

Sabrina Peters-Whitehead's article comprises the fourth and last section. She begins "Online Writing Center Theory, Research, and Practice: An Annotated Bibliography" by highlighting two issues that concern many writing center directors: Will cost-conscious administrators prefer to fund online tutoring rather than face-to-face tutoring? Will online tutoring set back writing center practice and theory to its "fix-it shop" days? Her bibliography, indexed on a sidebar, focuses mainly on print and online literature since 1996.

Section two, *Constructing an OWL*, is not only the largest of the four – 145 pages printed out – but the one with the greatest variety of texts. In an important research article, "More Talk, Less Fix: Tutor Training in a Facilitative Online Response Pedagogy," Roberta Buck and Dave Shumway conclude that "[o]nline response can mirror face-

to-face response" and provide tutoring transcripts to illustrate what they mean. Ben Rafoth and co-authors Barry Maid and Lisa Cahill counsel writing center practitioners on how to write grants in "Writing Grants to Support the Writing Center and OWL Initiatives and Feeding an OWL: Building a Nest in a Forest of Grants," respectively. Erin Karper guides us through a tutorial on "Web Usability and Online Writing Lab (OWL) Design." Several of the other pieces are so brief – two to four pages long – that they provide mostly advice or examples but not much commentary. Useful materials include Inman's intimidating "OWL Construction Checklist," Michele Eodice's sample lesson plan, "Tutoring and Teaching Writing," and Jennifer Jordan-Healey's course syllabus, "Peer Tutoring Practicum."

Section three, *OWL Maintenance*, is the thinnest of all the sections with six short pieces. In "Making Praxis the Axis: Researching Asynchronous Electronic Tutoring," Karen D. Austin argues that "the theorizing of online tutoring needs to take place while we practice, not before." But most of the pieces provide advice, including James A. Inman's "The OWL Maintenance Checklist" and Richard Godden and Bryon Grigsby's questionnaire suggestions for students, faculty and tutors in "Assessing Asynchronous Electronic Tutoring."

My initial dismay at the range of texts in *The OWL Guide* eased as I began to see how they resemble the exchange of documents (complete with typos and strange computer glitches) that happens almost daily on WCenter. Some names appear often on the listserv, and they do here, too: Inman has six pieces in *The OWL Guide*, counting his "Introduction," and there are others with multiple submissions. I suspect that, as on the listserv, Inman and the others are responding to perceived needs rather than trying to lord over a domain. The question that concerns me most, however, is whether *The OWL Guide* is a service project or scholarship. Primary materials have their place, but I believe the most valuable submissions contain some research, discussion or theory. I encourage the editors to come down on the side of scholarship and include more annotated or elaborated submissions in the future edition of *The OWL Guide*.

On the other hand, I find the lively hodgepodge of different points of view in *The OWL Guide* reassuring, but not simply because they also remind me of WCenter. I know that, finally, I'm not at all interested in "synthesizing the range of contributions." 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.

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