Perceptions of Writing Center Consultants Towards Online Writing Consultation

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PERCEPTIONS OF WRITING CENTER CONSULTANTS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

A THESIS
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts
By
Janet Dengel
Montclair State University
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Perceptions of Writing Center Consultants Towards Online Writing Consultation

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Abstract

This study reports on the changing perceptions of writing consultants at one university (Montclair State University's Center for Writing Excellence) who began working synchronously online in a chat format with students starting in Spring 2011. The one-year study was comprised of a survey and interview with 16 writing consultants who, prior to 2011, had only worked with students in a face-to-face environment. After capturing initial reactions, the same survey and interview questions were repeated with 11 consultants who chose to be the first online writing consultants at the university. The gap this research undertook was to provide a measurement for consultant success online while adhering to writing center philosophies and best practices. The results of the research provided improved training and practices for online consultation. The implications for a wider audience of consulting professionals are the specific areas of success and challenges that can be instituted or addressed in order to serve the student population virtually as well as in person.

*Keywords*: writing centers, writing consultation, tutoring, synchronous instruction, online learning
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Perceptions of Writing Consultants Towards Online Writing Consultation (OWC)

During the Spring 2011 semester The Center for Writing Excellence (CWE) at Montclair State University offered online synchronous writing consultation for the first time. The fact that none of the writing consultants, including myself, had ever worked synchronously with students online provided an opportunity to collect initial perceptions of consultants before any online experience and gauge the change in their opinions after four months of working online. The categories that would be examined Pre- and Post-OWC were: overall ability/confidence, use of technology, adherence to writing center best practices, ability to address higher (global) and lower (local) order concerns, ability to adjust to textual communication, and the miscellaneous categories of creating safe space online, motivating students, and being spontaneous.

In the 21st Century, this journey to a virtual world would seem to be an easy transition and, in many ways it has been. An online platform was purchased, training took place, and a box that states, “I would like an online consultation” was added to the online scheduling page at www.montclair.edu/cwe. Yet, at the Fall 2010 joint conference of the International Writing Centers Association and National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (IWCA-NCPTW) held in Baltimore, Maryland, both a wave of enthusiasm for and an undercurrent against online consulting could be strongly sensed from writing consultants representing centers across the country and around the world. It became evident that no matter how many years or decades learning takes place online, each new group of educators, including writing consultants, must contemplate their own acceptance and adjustment to a virtual realm. On a local level, would the perceptions of a group of writing consultants at Montclair State University echo either of these disparate poles of sentiments, find a voice in the middle, or establish a new voice online to meet the
expectations and needs of the Montclair State University community? As with anything new, especially in regards to technology, trepidation centers on what is lost and what is gained. As one coworker of mine, when faced with the prospect of consulting online in addition to face to face, queried: "What will happen to the magic?" In measurable terms, this "magic" can be defined as success.

In a face-to-face session, magic or success occurs when the focus is on the writer, not just what they have written. In other words, a paper may only last as long as a semester, but the way a writer grows—in confidence, in ability to communicate in words, in the use of writing skills, will last forever. In a session, writing consultants often pay attention to the processes of brainstorming, writing, revising, and editing (Emig, 1971; Flower & Hayes, 1980; Rijlaarsdam & van der Bergh, 2006; Torrance & Galbraith, 2006). Some consultants uniquely devise the steps to address this process; others learn proven techniques in training that are incorporated as an integral part of the daily consultation experience.

The physical space of the writing center also provides "magic" by constructing an atmosphere conducive to a collaborative session. At Montclair State University undergraduate students serve as greeters who welcome clients, assist with appointments, and put visitors to the center at ease until the appointment begins. Then the consultant ushers the writer into a comfortable room while making small talk to put the writer at ease. Consultants and writers establish an informal relationship based on equal seating side by side rather than across from one another and paper placement in the middle of the consultant and writer. This encourages agency and ownership on the part of the student writers who take their own notes and spend time writing rather than watching an "expert"
mark the paper in red ink. The equal exchange of ideas, as well as body language and verbal cues, creates a safe space for writers to openly discuss their work. Once a session begins, the collaborative “team” of student writer and consultant (Brooks, 1991; Lunsford, 1991) determines the goal for the session, reads the paper together (or brainstorms ideas if not paper has been composed), evaluates the text, and discusses revision. They work in collaboration addressing higher (global) order concerns first, such as organization and content development, then lower (local) order concerns, such as grammar and punctuation (Shaughnessy, 1971; Sommers, 1980). Time is taken to point out the strengths of the writer as well as finding areas that need revision. As consultants move into virtual space, their process and methods of consulting may need revision in order to overcome limitations or to take advantage of unique online potential learning experiences.

**Problem Statement**

No matter how attractively a writing center decorates its walls, how many reference books line its shelves, or how broadly consultants smile and welcome students, some student writers will just not step over the writing center threshold to engage in a one-on-one, in-person session. For some of today’s digitally savvy college students, online synchronous sessions may remove certain barriers. At Montclair State University, where students often work full time in addition to their course load, the benefit of logging onto a computer at lunch for a session gives them virtual access to the writing center. On the other hand, students who graduated from urban or rural school districts with limited exposure to technology may not have the needed digital skill or easy access to computers. Multilingual writers or writers with learning disabilities may face additional challenges
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communicating through an online written chat-based platform. Based on the needs of a diverse population of writers in a learning community and access to computers, writing centers must be careful not to erect new barriers (Selfe & Hawisher, 2009).

Rather than approach this question of successfully consulting online in relation to a problem or any one population of writers who use the writing center’s services, I chose an inductive method aimed at answering the focus questions in order to better serve the ultimate goal of helping to improve the online experience for both writers and consultants. The main challenge that the research undertook was to determine if and how online consulting can successfully serve a virtual community while, at the same time, remain true to the writing center mission of helping students grow as writers (North, 1984). How can consultants ensure that they can adhere to this goal during online sessions and heed Lunsford’s (1995) call to “continue to protect and propagate the fundamental values of Writing Centers...collaboration, deep mutual respect, enhanced agency for students, time for talk and experimentation, and attention to process?”

Focus Questions

This research will seek the answer to the question: From the consultant’s point of view, what makes for a successful synchronous online consultation? More specific categories of questions include:

- What are the perceptions of writing consultants towards Online Writing Consultation (OWC) prior to online experience?
- What are the consultants’ expectations about online writing consultations?
- What are the consultants’ definitions, parameters, and indications of success for face to face and online sessions? Do they differ?
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- How do perceptions change after consultants have conducted online writing consultations for four months?
- How can rapport be built on line? How can personality, empathy, and friendliness interface during online conferences?
- Can online writing conferences hold true to writing center philosophy and best practices?
- Does the online writing session need to employ the same processes or elements of a face-to-face session in order to meet the consultants’ measure of success?
- What new elements are necessary for successful online writing consultations?
- What part of the consultation process must be sacrificed? What is enhanced?
- What do the consultants view as the benefits and drawbacks of online writing consultations for the writers they work with and for themselves?

Methodology

This study collected both quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (interviews) on the views of a small sampling of consultants for one year, January 2011 to January 2012. Their perceptions towards synchronous online writing consultation were gathered twice: before ever sitting before the screen and keyboard and then after they consulted online for four months. The research went beyond the technical mastery of a new system; it focused on the perceptions of writing center professionals in regards to their ability to successfully meet the center’s goal of helping students grow as writers through online practices and processes in comparison to their face-to-face consulting experiences.

The research project collected both empirical data and a narrative of one writing center’s experience while instituting an online writing consultation component. An online
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survey served as a comparison of writing consultants’ preconceived ideas towards an online format to their actual experience consulting online. In-person interviews recorded the story behind consultants’ beliefs towards the concept of online consulting as well as documenting real narratives describing their sessions. Specifically, the methodology was employed as follows:

1. Consultants who worked for the Center for Writing Excellence at Montclair State University and who had volunteered to train for and conduct online writing consultations (OWCs) were contacted via email and asked to fill out online surveys gauging their perceptions of the OWC experience.

2. One survey was filled out online prior to consulting online; the second was filled out online after the consultant conducted OWC sessions online for four months.

3. This procedure was repeated for two semesters as newly trained online consultants were added to the survey pool.

4. There were two online surveys and each consisted of 30 questions and took approximately 30 minutes to complete for a total of 1 hour.

5. In addition, consultants were invited to take part in two in-person interviews with open-ended questions.

6. Similar to the online survey, the first interview was conducted prior to their online consulting experience; the second was conducted after they held online sessions for four months.

7. Each in-person interview took approximately 1 hour for a total of 2 hours.

8. The in-person interviews also continued with newly trained online consultants.
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9. It was not necessary for consultants who volunteered to fill out the online survey to agree to the in-person interview.

10. Similarly, if a consultant only wanted to participate in the in-person interview and not the online survey, their participation was still valuable and appreciated.

11. At any time, a study participant could have withdrawn from the study with no questions asked.

Theoretical Perspectives

The theoretical perspective behind the "Perceptions" research centered on writing consultants' philosophies and best practices. These methodologies are based on the very human factor of being able to follow individual writing consultation methods that have proven to be successful, while building rapport and relationships online. Rather than beginning the project with any rigid belief in one composition theory, the basis for the research was rooted in an eclectic (Hewett, 2010) or synthesis (Faigley, 1986) approach that allows for individuality for both consultant and student writer.

Five distinct categories were examined from the consultants' points of view prior to any experience consulting synchronously online and again after gaining experience. These categories included:

1. General ability and confidence of consultants to conduct successful online sessions. This speaks to the writing center philosophy of helping writers grow and improve (North, 1984) as well as the attainment of self-efficacy and confidence for online consultants (Pajares & Valiante, 2006).

2. Proficiency with technology and chat platform (Selfe, 1999; Prensky, 2001) needed to conduct online sessions.
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3. Adherence to or reinvention of writing center best practices (Murphy and Sherwood, 2008; Ryan and Zimmerelli, 2006; Harris and Pemberton, 1995; Coogan, 1999) for online success, including the ability to teach both process and product online as well as addressing global and local concerns (Hewett, 2010; Burnett, 2003).

4. The establishment of online relationships (Cooper, Bui, & Riker, 2008; Carlson & Apperson, 2000; Hewett, 2010) while finding a balance in consultant/student authority and collaboration (Lunsford, 1995; Bruffee, 1984; Shamoon & Burns, 1995);

5. Adjustment to textual conveyance of ideas and instruction (Torrance & Galbraith, 2006; Hewett, 2010).

Beyond these categories, a theory which may explain the underlying factor of reticence towards or enthusiasm for online writing consultation was investigated using Prensky’s (2001) study of Digital Natives/Digital Immigrants. He described immigrants as those who grew up adapting to new technology and often struggled to accomplish assimilation; the natives, “traditional-aged” college students today, were born into a fully technological world and thrive on constant usage of technology.

The online goal of successful sessions that writing centers face pivots around their ability to rise to the challenge of reaching out to digital natives and immigrants, underserved populations and multilingual writers and “speaking” to all populations in a virtual platform while keeping the “magic” that face-to-face consulting provides. To accomplish this, writing centers need to figure out what “magic” means in terms of conducting successful sessions online. This study used the primary research of surveys
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and interviews, and secondary research including books, articles and conference presentations, in order to discover how the success writing consultants feel they achieve during face-to-face consultations can be duplicated or reinvented so they can feel successful during synchronous online consultations.

Literature Review

The literature review is comprised of four areas: the historical progression of technology’s immersion in writing and writing centers; the response to technology by writing center consultants and administrators; the pedagogy and practices adopted for online consultation; and research surrounding online writing consultation.

A history (see Appendix E) of online writing consultation provided insight into the field to discover when online methods of writing consultation were first adopted, who initiated the technology, and why (Coogan, 1999; Hawisher, LeBlanc, Moran, & Selfe, 1996; Huot & Neal, 2006; Palmquist 2003). The chronological history pointed to the involvement of government, corporations, and private foundations guiding technology's immersion onto college campuses. The power of these groups sometimes also resulted in more computer infiltration than educators and/or writing centers wanted. Shermis, Burstein, and Leacock (2006) contended that “Some technologies can be political due to the way they were designed, created, and/or used within a particular community; other technologies are unalterably ideological” (p. 421). Coogan (1999) traced the use of technology in composition studies and writing centers with a promise of progress mixed with wariness, ambivalence, and distrust toward these alternative methods of reaching out to writers. The conversations among writers, consultants, texts, instructors, and peers can never be replaced by a “teaching machine” (p. 8). On the other hand, computer use in
composition has been hailed positively through the years in glowing terms such as “the greatest aid to the active scholar since the printing press” (Mason, 1982, p. 1). Palmquist (2003) voiced the middle-of-the-information superhighway view, that, “The history of computer support for writing centers...is a repeating pattern of initial enthusiasm, cautious assessment, and qualified success” (p. 395).

Most scholars agreed that online writing in all arenas—college, business, and personal—is here to stay. Lunsford (2010) stressed the importance of the response to technology by writing center consultants and administrators when she stated at the 2010 IWCA-NCPTW conference, “How we (writing centers) position ourselves in and respond to virtual spaces as well as physical spaces now seems...extraordinarily important.” Hawisher, LeBlanc, Moran, and Selfe (1996) noted a gap in that, “not fully told are the stories of part-time faculty, or of graduate students,...program administrators, deans, or provosts, many of whom have had important roles in the integration of computers and writing instruction” (p. 11). The response to technology by writing center consultants and administrators was not as evident in many of the field’s scholarly journals and presses, but this response was found to be very prominent in the Writing Lab Newsletter, which through the years, has captured the reactions of writing consultants and administrators as technology was adopted, tested, and adapted to support writing center theory and philosophy (Epes, 1978, Mason, 1982; Posey, 1990; Jordan-Henley & Maid, 1995). These pioneers into new technologies often not only tested and adapted but created their own computer programs to help writers (see Appendix E). As Online Writing Labs (OWLS) came into prominence starting in 1994, the web itself became a source for literature on the use of technology in writing centers (Harris & Pemberton, 1995). This
rise in the number of OWLS was noted by Crump, (1995) with a count of 250 links for OWLs on the National Writing Centers Association (NWCA) site in 1998 in comparison to 1993 when there were “virtually” none (p. 224).

The contributions of writing center consultants and administrators led to an examination of the role of writing centers not only with the use of technology in writing, but also as cultural informants for computer literacy (DeVoss, 2002). As DeVoss stated, "Writing center theory and practice must evolve so we can situate ourselves as crucial stakeholders, working toward a more complex and critical use of computing technologies and computer-related literacies (as cited in Gillespie et al., p. 167). DeVoss called upon writing consultants to evaluate text, language, space, and the importance of dialogue in order to make online sessions as “fruitful” (p. 182) as in-person consultations.

A review of the methods and best practices demonstrate that views in the field vary greatly. Coogan (1999) established the importance of dialogic theory as the basis for successful asynchronous online sessions by evaluating email conversations as a way to dialogue with students about meaning (p. 28). Yet, Harris and Pemberton (1995) insisted that “attempting to only replicate familiar face-to-face tutorial settings in an electronic, text-oriented environment can lead to frustration…Instead, it is important to recognize that OWLs … take advantage of the strengths of online environments and work with, not against, both local conditions and writing center theory” (p. 145). In The Online Writing Conference: A Guide for Teachers and Tutors, Hewett (2010) favored an eclectic approach based on individual needs of each student writer for each unique visit to the center, which encourages a more blended philosophy of “us[ing] any and all effective strategies from any and all epistemologies” (p. 79). Hewett repositioned the consultant
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not as a peer or equal discussing writing, but as an instructor with a “teacherly voice” (p. 80). She stated that this more directive, authoritative approach online does not diminish the student's ownership or change the writer's ideas, but that an online session must be “strategic” and “straightforward” because of its textual nature. Hewett’s methods are based on “A Study on Online Writing Instructor Perceptions” by Christa Ehmann Powers (Hewitt, Appendix 1, p. 163). This study, which focused on online classroom instruction rather than writing center consultation, pointed out pedagogical challenges, online teaching/learning modalities, student advantages to online instruction, and instructor attitudes towards online teaching.

Research into online writing consultation included both qualitative and quantitative studies. In Taking Flight with OWLs: Examining Electronic Writing Center Work (2000) editors Inman and Sewell compiled 20 articles about online writing consultation; 8 contained mentions of surveys, data collection, and questionnaires. Overall, the findings were positive towards the ability of technology in writing centers to disseminate information, yet negative about establishing relationships online. Shadle (1997) surveyed, visited, and interviewed directors of university and college writing centers with OWLs. His study focused on audience, purpose, use, and technical formats. His findings indicated that OWLs were created to: provide access for information about the center, support distance learning, answer FAQs, increase consultant availability, address computer literacy, and meet student need. A study at the University of Hong Kong (Curtis & Roskams, 2000) gauged the attitudes of 74 students towards using networked computers in writing courses and classes. Even though this study collected information on students’ satisfaction with online platforms, Curtis and Roskams noted
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that “tutors should help to minimize any mismatching between tutors’ and students’ expectations” by clearly emphasizing the benefits and limitations of online sessions (p. 38). Thomas, Hara, and DeVoss (1997) conducted research with Internet writing consultants (IWCs). Although the number of IWCs was not indicated, the results included consultants’ comments which indicated “difficulty in integrating Internet consulting into their conceptions of the Writing Center and its goals” (p. 71). Reflections of a small sampling of writing consultants gathered views about the online relationships of students/consultants, dialogues, and the anxieties that distance can create (Carlson & Apperson-Williams, 2000). Thurber (2000) wrote a case study based on journal notes taken during synchronous Internet writing center consultations. The findings, which also include a rating by 16 students on the value of the online platform, discussed the visual elements, session focus, technology, and resources.

Students’ perceptions were often the subject of research as in studies by Colpo, Fullmer, & Lucas (1998) which compiled user ratings on the navigability of a writing center web site and a follow up questionnaire which determined why 29 students did not continue email dialogue about their essays with writing consultants (Castner, 1995). An exit survey taken by 46 students was analyzed by Shewmake and Lambert (1996) to gauge student likes and dislikes about being tutored in cyberspace. In other research, English (2000) devised a scale and calculated interactivity between students and consultants by using the logs from cybertutorial sessions; very low interactivity was noted. In all of these studies, the limited follow-up conversations and interactivity pointed to a challenge in relationship development online.
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More recent research included an email survey by Ahrenhoerster & Brammer (2002) of online users to assess students' virtual experiences, the effectiveness of consultants' responses online, and if grades improved when using the OWL. The findings indicated a wide disparity between students in the 102 composition level (high satisfaction) compared to students in the 101 or 98 level, who voiced frustration with the lack of help with grammar. Qualitative cognitive research using stimulated-recall interviews (De Smet, Van Keer, De Wever, & Valcke, 2009) captured the reflections of consultants towards their role. The study showed that many online concerns mirror the face-to-face concerns of consultants, including providing a safe learning environment and balancing peer/teacher roles. Specific to online consultation was the fear of being misunderstood or misinterpreted in what should be "safe" ground. Burnett (2003) collected data from six months of online chats between herself and primary teacher trainees in order to address three areas of consultant online responsibilities: developing a supportive atmosphere, maintaining focus, and promoting discussion. Based upon the research, Burnett devised best practices for successful online sessions. Like Burnett's study, much of the research was aimed at providing better consultant training and producing more successful online sessions. Enders (2005) reported conversations from chat room conferences with analysis. Breuch and Racine (2000) argued that the uniqueness of online consultation calls for the development of specialized training with dialogue prompts, plus scripts for initial greeting, intertextual comments on the writers' papers, and end comments to conclude the session.

The literature review yielded mostly historical background, theoretical concerns, and how-to information for training and online sessions. Empirical studies in the review
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often included the responses of students, faculty, teachers, and administrators. The

“Perceptions” study filled a gap first noted by Hawisher et al. (1996) which still exists
more than 15 years later. The confidence or trepidation consultants feel when they log on
to a session will affect the outcome of those sessions, yet their voices are often not heard.
The “Perceptions” study captured the stories of graduate students and part-time writing
center staff by providing their initial responses to the online writing consultation
experience. The study data also indicated areas where solutions are needed for online
concerns and revealed specific areas of success online and the methods that led to that
success.

Ethics

Since I conducted the “Perceptions” research while also working as a writing
center consultant (both online and face to face) at the CWE, I needed to strive for
objectivity in my daily work routine so I did not sway or influence the opinions of my
coworkers. To accomplish this, I kept an open mind toward online consultation myself,
not forming an opinion of its merit or challenges. Questions for the interview were kept
general in order to be certain that I was not providing leading comments or areas of my
concern. In considering my Institutional Review Board (IRB) application, I also had to
ensure the anonymity of my peers who volunteered to participate in the survey and/or the
in-person interview. This was essential, since their opinions were related to their jobs and
they had to be protected against the danger that their opinions, good or bad, would not
affect their employment. Since my position ranked as a coworker rather than supervisor,
my collection and analysis of data and opinions did not unduly affect their work.
Furthermore, their identities were protected through pseudonyms for the online survey.
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Audiotapes of the interviews have been stored in a safe and will be erased after the research is completed and analyzed, according to IRB requirements.

Results

The participating CWE consultants included: 11 graduate students (four joined Montclair State University faculty, Fall 2011); two public school teachers; two professional writers; and one IT specialist.

The Perceptions study gathered these consultants' perceptions in five overarching areas: overall ability/confidence for online success, use of technology, adherence to writing center methods and best practices, adjustment to textual communication, and establishment of online relationships. The results will be analyzed and discussed in terms of both the instruments used, which included surveys and interviews, and also at two different time periods—once prior to experience consulting synchronously online (Pre-OWC) and after four month experience consulting synchronously online (Post-OWC).

For each category in this section, the survey statement(s) that related to the category will be included with its corresponding number from the actual survey. Both specific quantitative results and qualitative statements made in the interviews that add insight will be included for each category of the discussion.

Overall Ability/Confidence

The attainment of efficacy and self-confidence for online consultants Pre-OWC and Post-OWC was compared in the statement:

Survey (1): I am confident that I can conduct a writing consultation online rather than in person.
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Confidence in the ability to conduct a writing consultation online actually decreased slightly with the first foray into the virtual consulting experience. Pre-OWC 12 of the 16 participants agreed or strongly agreed that they were confident that they could conduct a writing consultation online, two disagreed, and one neither agreed nor disagreed. Post-OWC eight of the 11 agreed or strongly agreed, one strongly disagreed, and two neither nor disagreed. Percentages indicate a minor reduction in confidence attained from 75% Pre-OWC who felt confident they could conduct an online session to 72% Post-OWC who felt confident consulting online.

In the interviews, many consultants equated “confidence” with their idea of a successful session, whether online or face to face. On a positive note, Consultant E stated that “feedback from one of the writers I met with online expressed that I helped her with her writing. She told me she got an A on one of the papers which really reinforced my confidence.” Consultant I noted that “a successful online consultation is one that addresses the student's needs. The student understands me and I understand the student.” Consultant D expressed an ability to embody in-person strategies in order to work successfully in the virtual realm: “I was able to get a style down for conducting online sessions and I became more comfortable incorporating strategies that I use face to face online.” Consultant O was willing to put a number on her confidence: “I feel successful 90ish% of the time for both online and face to face. I don't know if I achieve everything in an online session, but I feel that students take something useful away with them.”

Some of the statements about the inability to feel successful online were voiced both Pre- and Post-OWC. Before working online, Consultant D felt that “online sessions will be unsuccessful for the client base. I would say 90% of the students I work with
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would not benefit from an online session; they have too much to go over.” After four months experience, the same consultant was still firm that “about 50% of my online session students walk away aggravated because I didn't help them due to frustration with technology problems. That statistic bothers me.” Consultant B measured the success rate at “about 50-50; about 50% of the time the online session meets students’ expectations. In person I feel 99% of sessions are successful.” The same consultant humorously noted Pre-OWC: “I’m confident. I’m confident that online sessions are going to go badly. I cannot do a serious critique, compose responses in my head, and type them simultaneously. Reading on the screen is not as easy as reading a physical piece of paper for me.” This consultant also pointed out the difference between capability and success in the Post-OWC interview: “I’m fully capable of doing an online session. I understand how it works to write things to students so they don’t go away crying. Am I confident that I’m always successful or that I’m helping them the best way? No. I walk away from them saying a lot of times, ‘ugh, that wasn’t good.’ I look on the schedule and when I see I have an online session, I say and say ‘oh, great’ and get frustrated.”

Post-OWC, Consultant J balanced the opposing opinions voiced about consultant confidence: “I don’t fear online sessions anymore, but at the same time, there’s that element of the unknown in terms of the interaction. In a face to face, you get to know the writer. You don’t get that online. I’m not confident my online sessions are all going to go well, but I have the skills to run a successful session online.”

Use of Technology

The training session held in January 2011 was mentioned in relation to confidence during the interviews. Consultant A stated: “I felt much more confident after training. I
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was so scared of the technology, but it’s not bad.” However, this initial training covered mostly the mechanics of working with the technological format and practice sessions to learn how to use the software, rather than theory or tips to adapting to online sessions. The initial WCOnline platform posed many problems and became a major roadblock to success online; however, the interviews yielded different opinions in comparison to the results of the statement:

Survey (2): I am comfortable with the level of technological experience needed to conduct an OWC.

The survey statement indicated that, prior to working online (Pre-OWC) 14 of the 16 were comfortable with the level of technological experience needed to conduct an online writing consultation; one was not comfortable and one neither agreed nor disagreed. After four months of online experience, 10 of the 11 who consulted online were comfortable with the technology and one neither agreed nor disagreed. In comparing percentages, 88% were confident with their technological experience to conduct an online session Pre-OWC and this rose to 91% for the consultants who gained experience online. The interviews, at least during the initial phase of WCOnline, countered these quantitative results.

In the interviews, many consultants indicated ease with familiar technology but uneasiness in using a technological platform new to them. On the confident side, Pre-OWC comments included: “I’m used to communicating on computers through chats and that’s very second-nature to me” (Consultant B); “The chat portion is very similar to AOL’s AIM and I grew up using AIM” (Consultant D); and “For the most part, I’ve been on the cutting edge with innovations in technology so it’s not an issue for me”
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(Consultant E). Those expressing some reluctance Pre-OWC noted, "There is a lot of
technology I don't use regularly and that's why online consulting makes me nervous"
(Consultant A); and "Technology and I don't get along. I don't understand how it works.
I like pens. I like face-to-face consultations. I'm young, but I have an old soul"
(Consultant L).

Consultants who took the training in January 2011 and who were interviewed in
May 2011, were already reporting ways that the platform chosen had to change.
Consultants expressed concern over the inability to get the audio/visual portion to work,
difficulties uploading papers written on MACs, and the cumbersome need to send the
paper back and forth instead of seeing changes and comments immediately. Post-OWC,
Consultant E summed up the observation of many that "the technological aspects are the
biggest hurdle for the students and the consultants." Consultant F admitted to finding a
way around the frustration: "The technology we're using is not intuitive; I have been
using my private email for students to email me their papers because when you click in
the editing mode and unclick, your changes are not saved." Consultant D, who served on
a CWE committee established in the Fall 2010 semester to research online consultation
stated: "I don't feel this was the best program to go with. I may be biased, but
Googledocs was more user friendly, and the features of Google are more well-known,
making it less of an adjustment for students and consultants."

In the Fall 2011 semester a new version of the software addressed some of these
complaints. It removed the requirement to upload the paper and instead allowed the
writer to cut and paste directly onto the screen from a Word document. The need to save
and use editing modes was no longer necessary. Once these technical problems were
solved with the newer version, the Post-OWC interviews in Fall 2011 never mentioned technology as a main concern. Consultant O, stated Post-OWC: “When it comes to WCOnline, initially I may have been an immigrant to the technology, but I think my ‘nativeness,’ my constantly being on the computer using social networking websites, using Blackboard, typing on Word, helped me get acquainted with the technology rather quickly.”

The survey also gauged consultants’ views of the importance and need for digital communication and online consultation offerings with the following statement:.

Survey (25): Digital communication is as relevant as oral communication.

Surprisingly, agreement with this statement dropped slightly once consultants worked online. Pre-OWC, 11 of the 16 consultants agreed or strongly agreed with the above statement, three disagreed, and two neither agreed nor disagreed. Post-OWC, seven of the 11 online consultants agreed or strongly agreed, two disagreed or strongly disagreed, and two neither agreed nor disagreed. The percentage (69) of consultants Pre-OWC who viewed digital communication as important was higher than the percentage (63) who viewed is as being as relevant as oral communication after they worked online.

In the interviews the absence of oral cues, such as tone and inflection, and their importance in communication for auditory learners was viewed as a major loss in communicating. Also, the confining space of the chat box with its short, written responses added to the disappointing loss of auditory conversation. Consultant F stated Post-OWC: “If only we could talk to each other, I don’t care about seeing the person, but an audio component would make a huge difference. I miss it when I have to type one line in a little box.” She admitted that she literally went ‘outside the box’ and asked a student
if she could call them, adding: “Immediately, it was 1,000 times better; she could hear me...she could hear my inflection...she could understand...she had someone to bounce ideas off of.”

Consultants also challenged the value of virtual learning over face-to-face traditions in the following statement:

Survey (29): OWCs are necessary in order to meet the needs of today’s students.

The percentage of consultants agreeing with this statement again dropped once the consultants worked online with students. Pre-OWC, 87% agreed that the online offering was necessary; Post-OWC, only 63% of those working synchronously online felt that this addition was necessary to meet the needs of today’s students. Although most of the interviewees agreed with Consultant A that “it’s a digital world,” some, including Consultant C, qualified this by adding that “online sessions are relevant to a student’s lifestyle, but I also want a flashing banner that says, ‘Caution! Your expectations and outcomes in this online session are going to be different than in person!’” Even before working online, Consultant G voiced a necessary compromise, rather than pitting face to face against online in today’s competitive world: “With a lot of technology, it’s good to have a starting point because if we don’t, we’re ignoring it as a culture or fighting it and it’s not going to progress or help anyone. It’s never going to flourish, especially in the humanities where it’s lacking and we trail the sciences in technology.” Consultant N, who did not opt to consult online, challenged the entire idea of technology as being beneficial: “As far as technology at your fingertips, I think many people have an addictive personality. Overall, it’s creating a co-dependency; it’s making us slaves or
Adherence to Writing Center Best Practices/Methods

This section will cover results for best practices/methods including general adherence online to proven face-to-face methods and the ability to keep a session student-centered. Writing center methods based on the composition theories of addressing process as well as product and working from higher (global) to lower (local) order concerns will also be covered in separate subheadings.

The first general statement measured a marked improvement in consultants’ belief that the practices they embrace in one-on-one session could be used successfully in a virtual setting:

Survey (3): The methods I use in a face-to-face consultation will greatly change for an online session.

Pre-OWC, 12 of the 16 consultants believed they would have to change their face-to-face methods in order to work with writers online, one disagreed, and three neither agreed nor disagreed. For the 11 consultants who opted to work online, six agreed or strongly agreed that they changed their methods, three strongly disagreed or disagreed, and two neither agreed nor disagreed. This shows a marked difference in that, Pre-OWC, 75% believed their methods must change, while Post-OWC only 54% believed that they changed their methods and best practices.

Post-OWC interviews supported this decrease in the assumption that a consultant’s methods would change greatly. After four months of working online, many consultants began to incorporate the same best practices from their face-to-face sessions,
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with some modifications when necessary: “I like reading works out loud. I'm listening for clues and connections. I guess there is no reason why I can't read out loud to myself [during an online session],” related Consultant E. The same consultant expressed that encouraging writers to “do follow-up sessions online as well, especially on the last draft” was especially beneficial. Consultants noted that it was even more important online to prompt the writers to type in the chat box exactly what they need help with and to still ask the writer what the assignment entails. “When you respond to students' specific questions, they get real feedback and they respond to that,” stated Consultant I. Taking time to give positive feedback was also mentioned by several consultants: “When you tell them you like a sentence, a paragraph or an idea, it's always a powerful thing” (Consultant I); and “In person, I always stop reading and say ‘great point’ or ‘I love your wording here.’ At first I found that I was less likely to type in that compliment online; we got to the nitty-gritty more. I now remember to compliment the writer in the chat box” (Consultant A). This conscious resolve to include a best practice from face-to-face sessions was supported by the survey question that produced an equal 88% response both Pre- and Post-OWC in agreement to the statement:

Survey (27): I am comfortable giving both positive and negative feedback online.

The best practices of introductions and wrapping up an online session also began to mirror the face-to-face practices. Consultant B stated Post-OWC that “in the end, at the five minute mark, I type up a recap and always ask ‘do you have any other questions for me?’ At first this felt awkward. It was a long goodbye; but, I became more comfortable with experience.” Consultant O stated: “My introductions are similar. I ask nearly the same questions of online appointments that I do for in-center appointments. Wrapping up
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Is easier for me online. I usually type a wrap up statement with some tips for next time. In person, students don’t always take notes; online students are able to return to my [written] comments.” Concern about time limits (an online session runs 25 minutes just like an in-person session) was mentioned by many who agreed with Consultant D: “The introduction process is cut to 10 seconds because, basically, you have to start the online session with ‘Hello, my name is ______. Please upload your paper.’”

The next three questions addressed the writing center philosophy of ensuring that sessions are student-centered and collaborative rather than consultant-driven sessions.

Survey (26): I will be able to encourage students to explore their ideas in an online session without interjecting my own ideas.

Pre-OWC, 11 of the 16 consultants felt they could encourage students to explore ideas without interjecting their own; one disagreed, and four neither agreed nor disagreed. Post-OWC showed an increase (from 6% to 18%) in the belief that a consultant would interject their own ideas. Although consultants started to question if they would interject too much into the online conversation, the original percentage that agreed they could encourage the students to explore their own ideas (69% Pre-OWC) only decreased slightly (63% Post-OWC).

In the interviews, the written record of the session raised the concern that online sessions could become much more directive, while in-person sessions were viewed as mainly collaborative. Pre-OWC, Consultant B remarked: “When there’s a written transcript they can even relate it to their professor and say, ‘the writing consultant said this.’ Everything we say isn’t gold, it’s just suggestions. I’m afraid that a student may take our feedback as a concrete yardstick measuring how to write their paper.” Pre-OWC,
three consultants raised another concern: “[Online] a student can now incorporate the consultant’s language in an academic paper that belongs to the student” (Consultant C); “If a consultant writes something there could be a plagiarism problem if the student were to just copy and paste those words into a paper. That wouldn’t happen in a face-to-face session” (Consultant G); and “[Online] you may come across an apathetic student who wants you to do the work for them. Every time you type, your words are set in front of them, making it easier for them to plagiarize your ideas which were only meant to prompt them to describe their own thoughts (Consultant O).”

Other consultants, Pre-OWC, saw online as a perfect opportunity to make sessions more student-driven: “I think sometimes as consultants we get too wrapped up in guiding the students. Online, because time is an issue, the student must have specific goals and the session will be student-based and student-driven,” stated Consultant D. The same consultant noted an exception: “Online sessions have to be student driven, but that’s difficult on the student if they are not really aware of that power.” Pre-OWC, Consultant D also voiced the worry that during face-to-face sessions, “you can get in a good groove and feed off each other in a collaborative approach; online you can lose that.” Many echoed this idea Pre-OWC, theorizing that the relaxed face-to-face atmosphere that encourages the exploration of ideas would be replaced by a less collaborative, straightforward approach online. Some consultants (Pre-OWC) were concerned about seeming to be “too bossy (Consultant E)” in the online chat box or being perceived as “talking down to students” (Consultant L), “sounding authoritative or apathetic” (Consultant O), or “judgmental and chastising” (Consultant A).
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Post-OWC some, such as Consultant F, viewed a more directive approach online as beneficial: "I cut to the chase online because it takes so much longer to communicate. I'm a lot more specific in my method and it's been helpful to the students." After experience, Consultant D Post-OWC still felt that "you have to be more guiding; there's not as much room to be personable and fun." Yet, this same consultant became conscious that a collaborative tone can be established online: "The consultant has to set the tone. I think it's important to lose that authoritative tone online in order to cue the student into the kind of dynamic that you're aiming for. You don't want the students to think of you as an authority figure because you want them to consider your words as advice and not direction." She called for "strict guidelines for online sessions to benefit both the student and the consultant, so we should be able to affect the mentor, not the authority attitude."

Consultant J welcomed the necessity for a student-directed session online: "I rely on the person on the other side of the screen to tell me exactly what their objectives are. You can't have chit-chat; it has to be more businesslike. If they paste their paper in the box and type, 'what do you think?,' I coax what they are trying to achieve out of them."

Although many supported the idea of requiring a specific student-identified goal or questions, Consultant I stated honestly: "Filling out a form on what they want to accomplish is never filled out. I think the number one area they want to work on, even face to face is left blank."

Post-OWC, Consultant B recommended using the "facilitative approach and focusing on open-ended questions because online there's a temptation to be more directive and to dictate." This consultant found that students who are driven and directed often made the online session successful: "They were on the ball and we didn't waste
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time with anything. They specifically knew what they wanted to work on so I was able to
look at their intro, give them feedback, answer their direct questions, and give them a
link. It was very efficient.” Consultant F did not see this possibility at all: “Student-driven
sessions just don’t happen online. It’s not necessarily consultant-driven, but how can it be
student-driven with the silences?”

The range in capability for students to drive the session was often noted: “I think
it depends on the student,” said Consultant O: “Some students are very passive and I take
the reins a bit more. I think that, in general, the sessions are always collaborative because
I ask a lot of questions.” Consultant A, who only had informational and getting-started
sessions, boasted: “I never saw a paper so my sessions were all conversational and
dialogic.” Even though dialogic, collaborative discussion often took longer online.
Consultant J strived for this conversational tone: “I mimic the face to face with dialogue
or a Q&A, such as ‘oh, this is interesting, what do you mean by this?’ Once a writer
answered, ‘it’s right there on the screen’ and copied and pasted the line again. LOL.”

Ability to Address Higher (Global) to Lower (Local) Order Concerns

To explore this area, two survey statements framing the same idea, but worded in
different ways, were used.

Survey (10): There will be more emphasis online with lower-order writing concerns
(LOCs) such as grammar.

There was little change between the perception and reality noted with 75% Pre-
OWC disagreeing to the statement and 72% disagreeing after working online. Before
OWC experience, 12 of the 16 consultants disagreed (seven) or strongly disagreed (five)
that the emphasis online would switch to a local concentration of concerns such as
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grammer and punctuation, three neither agreed nor disagreed, none agreed with the statement. Post-OWC, eight of the 11 disagreed or strongly disagreed, two neither agreed nor disagreed and one strongly agreed that there would be more emphasis of grammar online.

Survey (12): I will be able to keep emphasis on higher-order concerns (HOCs), such as organization and content in the student's paper during an online session.

Posed this way, consultants changed their opinions greatly after working online with writers and indicated concern with requests to address grammar online. Pre-OWC, 13 of the 16 agreed or strongly agreed they could keep the session emphasis on HOCs, one disagreed, and two neither agreed nor disagreed. Post-OWC, six of the 11 agreed or strongly agreed, two disagreed or strongly disagreed and three neither agreed nor disagreed. Comparing percentages, 81% of consultants thought that they could keep emphasis on HOCs rather than LOCs during sessions, but only 54% of the consultants found this to be true after four months of experience.

The interviews pinpointed some of the specific about addressing HOCs and LOCs online. Consultants often used the word “fear” in the Pre-OWC interviews and the specific anxiety was expressed by Consultant B: “We want to make sure that [online consultations] do not come across as any kind of editing service.” Consultant C echoed this by stating: “I would like the student to choose one area to work on of more global concern. Now if they answer, ‘I just want you to proofread my paper,’ the consultant must fall back into ‘well we don’t do that here. Focusing on organization or development may be a more significant or relevant way to spend your time.” Time was another worry described by Consultant C: “When you’re looking at global concerns, you have to read
the document and get ideas. How many global comments can you make realistically in a 25-minute session?” Consultant E noted: “We may start going through a first draft and they want us to address their central claim, but we also don’t see a clear understanding of the issues or works included in the paper. Online we may not be able to go into depth to put a strategy together to address both issues. Face to face we can talk about their support of the argument and their sources, but online it’s difficult because of the limitations of the communication.” When consultants thought out beforehand the specific global concerns they often address in person, online consulting seemed to fall short. Consultant J noted: “If a writer doesn't understand construction of an essay, defending a central claim, or if they are completely in the dark about an assignment, the online consultation may not allow you to get across that critical awareness of the problems. There must be some sophistication and competence involved on the writer’s behalf.”

Post-OWC, some consultants stated that it was easier to stick to HOCs during an online session. Consultant I said: “We can say all day long that we’re going to address higher-order concerns first, but when a student is a multilingual writer and has mistakes, I feel you need to point them out. Online I can't write on their paper or if I do I have to write it in caps or write a comment in the chat box. I don’t have time to write, ‘I notice you keep making this grammar mistake.’ I’m just trying to get through their paper.” As noted before, sessions where they student stated their specific goal, whether a global or local issue, went the most successful. Consultant B stated: “One student had specific questions about grammar and wrote ‘I have trouble using commas.’ We went over a paragraph and I could show and explain commas to her. She said she understood what I meant and because we had extra time and she was so prepared, we worked on some
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citation questions.” Although this was a successful session for local concerns, the consultant added that “online sessions force higher-order concerns. For mechanics, it’s hard to edit. It’s easier to work on content and organization but it takes a lot of chatting.” Consultant H confirmed that “it’s easier to do HOC online than grammar. It’s hard to discuss commas online.”

A wariness of proofreading the paper as opposed to “pointing out patterns of error online and directing them to resources” was a main concern expressed by Consultant O. Consultant J stated that “sentence-level sessions can be tedious, especially when a writer on the other side of the screen is asking for each sentence, ‘does a comma go here, or not?’” This consultant additionally found that “higher-order concerns such as central claims and evidence really work online because your questions to the writer literally stick to the screen and they feel compelled to answer. The question is in the dialogue box and I’m not typing anything else because I want them to think and answer that question.” Consultant O talked about lower-order (local) writing concerns online, but also offered a solution: “For grammar help, online can be especially problematic. It can easily go from identifying patterns of error to an editing session. Rather than having the students immediately upload their paper, talk to them for 5 to 10 minutes about their ideas and the assignment, and then have them upload the paper and begin a conversation. This way the focus is on their needs rather than being shifted to the consultant’s interpretation of their needs.”

After working online with writers for four months, many consultants started to devise other practices to ensure that HOCs were not abandoned or did not have a lower priority over LOCs when working online. Consultant D found success with HOCs online
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by “trying to find their golden example and highlighting it. Then I do a version of modeling by asking them to use their own example. If they don’t have a central claim, I ask them to tell me in a broad sense what they are trying to say in their paper.” The same consultant found that the HOC that was the most difficult to address online was organization: “Something that is unsuccessful online is a reverse outline. It’s too complicated for them to put into effect. In person they can also highlight ideas and concepts in color. I kept trying different ways online but the student kept replying, ‘I don’t understand what you mean.’” Patience can pay off online as well as in person, as the same consultant noted: “With another student, basically we worked on the central claim and she reworded it about eight times in that session until she felt it matched her analysis.” Consultant F added that the HOC areas most difficult online were “flow, transitions, central claims, and expanding ideas.” She did note that this was a concern mostly for First-Year Writing students. In the end, consultants often adhered to the same methods that work in person as explained by Consultant J: “If they are worried about commas in a first draft, they should be focusing more on content. I don’t want to highjack them but I say, ‘sure we’ll look at your patterns of commas, but let’s consider where you are in developing content too.’”

Ability to Focus on Process versus Product

Closely linked to higher-order or global concerns is the importance of discussing the writers’ process during a session. Three survey questions addressed the composition theory of focusing on the writing process, not just the product (paper).

Survey (16): I will be able to address the importance of the writing process online.
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Survey (17): Prewriting exercises such as brainstorming can just as easily be conducted online as in person.

Survey (18): I will be able to guide students through the specific steps on how to improve drafts during an online session.

Pre-OWC, 13 of the 16 consultants perceived that they would be able to address the importance of the writing process during online sessions, only one disagreed, and two neither agreed nor disagreed. Post-OWC only six found that the writing process was addressed online, two disagreed, and three neither agreed nor disagreed. This question showed a significant drop (81% to 54%) in the original perception that the importance of the writing process could be addressed online to the reality of actually working online with a paper copied onto the screen. Interestingly, the specific area of brainstorming had a positive increase once consultants worked online. Pre-OWC, only three of 16 consultants thought brainstorming or working on prewriting online would be as easy as in person, ten disagreed, and three neither agreed nor disagreed. Post-OWC, four of the 11 said brainstorming online was successful, six strongly disagreed (two) or disagreed (four) and one neither agreed nor disagreed. While only 19% Pre-OWC thought brainstorming online would not be easy Pre-OWC, 36% of the consultants with experience saw this as an area that worked well online. It should be noted that the negative perception of brainstorming online was not fully reduced after experience (the percentage only dropped from 63% to 54%). Opinions on guiding students through specific steps on how to improve drafts hardly changed at all from the Pre-OWC survey to the Post-OWC survey, with 66% thinking the revision process would be possible online to 63% stating that it was possible to accomplish revision sessions online.
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In general, the ability to address process rather than just the paper on the screen in front of them was often questioned during the Pre-OWC interviews. Consultant E stated: “Part of the goal of the CWE is to meet the needs of the student beyond the writing project they’re working on. In terms of meeting that goal online, I think there are limitations. There are certain dynamics of face to face that just can't be reproduced online. You have to focus more on the text that you’re working on rather than the writer.” This strong sentiment was repeated by Consultant J: “A successful online session means meeting what their goals are and also having the writer understand the process so they can continue writing despite their perceived difficulties or they can start writing more advanced composition.” Consultant K stressed that they must “leave the online session with the mind frame that they are excited to work to make changes.” During the Pre-OWC interviews, consultants wondered if their written suggestions or directions would be taken seriously. Consultant D posed the following: “If you ask them to rewrite something, online operates differently and they probably wouldn’t do it during a session. They’re not in first grade; you can’t say ‘write this and show it to me.’ Who am I to direct them? The most I’ll get from them is ‘yes, I’ll rewrite my central claim later.’” Post-OWC, consultants found the opposite to be true. Consultant E stated: “I have had them do writing online. If they don’t have a strong claim, I’ll ask them to try rewriting it. I had a student who needed help with topic sentences and I said ‘do you want to write a sentence and show it to me?’ She did.” Consultant O stated: “When students have a totally botched essay, it will be hard to address online. It will take a much longer time to type responses out, especially if you have to explain your own confusion with the paper and then try to figure out his/her confusion.” Consultant F found a solution: “If a paper needs a large
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After working online for four months, Consultant J stated that “addressing process is natural to my sessions online. ‘Where are you in the process? When is it due?’ These questions help me when reading and it can help me teach them process.” Consultant M felt that the revision process may be even more evident to the online consultant “as we see them typing, deleting, and typing again, we know they’re thinking it through.”

Brainstorming online received the most positive reviews in the interviews. Consultant J stated: “I’m getting a lot more ideation type consults online where the student needs to come up with something to write about, so there’s not much to read. Sometimes they just generate ideas and I’m happy to provide the forum.” Consultant O stated that “online sessions are great for brainstorming because the student can list and record their ideas to reflect on later.”

Ability to Adjust to Textual Communication

The textual record of a session was seen in both a positive and negative light by consultants. Two survey responses gathered consultants’ opinions about textual conveyance being the only way to communicate online and the concrete benefit to the student of a transcript of an online session.

Survey (4): I am comfortable that my comments to a student will be in writing during an OWC.

Very little change occurred from the original perception towards written comments online when compared to the reality of working online completely in written text. Pre-OWC, 12 of the 16 agreed (six) or strongly agreed (six), two disagreed, and two neither agreed nor disagreed. Post-OWC, eight of the 11 consultants working with
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students online agreed (three) or strongly agreed (five), and three neither agreed nor disagreed. After four months experience, none of the consultants disagreed or strongly disagreed. Pre-OWC, 76% were comfortable that their comments to a student would be in writing during an online consultation and 72% were comfortable Post-OWC.

Survey (15): *I will need to make more deliberate choices in wording with responses to students' papers online because my response will create a written record.*

Pre-OWC survey responses showed that 82% of consultants were concerned with the written record and saw a need to make more deliberate choices in wording online. This percentage dropped to 63% who agreed with this statement Post-OWC. Many of the interviews indicated that consultants began to relax online and concentrate on the benefit of the conversation for the writer, rather than how they were viewed as professionals.

Before any experience online, 13 of the 16 consultants agreed (six) or strongly agreed (seven) that they would have to be more deliberate in their textual wording online, two disagreed, and one neither agreed nor disagreed. After four months of online experience, seven out of 11 agreed (three) or strongly agreed (four), one neither agreed nor disagreed, one disagreed, and two strongly disagreed.

This adjustment to written-only communication elicited very strong and varied responses in the interviews. Pre-OWC, Consultant B admitted: “It’s a little weird to know that there’s a hard copy of everything I communicate to the student. Not that I’m saying things that are bad, but in person you can correct yourself and keep playing off your words.” Consultant K echoed this concern: “Everything is written down, so you really have to think about what you’re saying. That would make me pause. I would think of how I am being seen by the student. There’s a transcript and, knowing that, what if I say
something wrong? What if I give wrong advice? I’d have to be really, really certain about what I was saying. It would make me really nervous that I gave the wrong information and there was a transcript to prove it.” Consultant G said of the written record: “It’s concrete. It’s solid. It’s something rather than just a thought that can disappear.” Consultant C stressed that “the student has a written record to refer back to, so the consultant must take the time to be specific and clear.” Consultant M added: “As a consultant you may not make the right choice of words; you must weigh more carefully what you write. When you talk, you talk more freely and you can break down a message more clearly. To send the right message in writing takes a lot more time.” Consultant I brought up the challenge of deliberating on wording during a session: “You can’t type as fast as you talk and to type and discuss and think at the same time online makes it more difficult. What [online consulting] asks us to do is really hard.”

Post-OWC interviews indicated some changes in perception towards comfort with the text-only format of online sessions. “There’s an ease with communication and exchange with the writing,” stated Consultant E: “I thought there would be a real barrier to clear communication and interaction. I thought that in comparison to face to face, it just wouldn’t be as effective. Even with using the chat window, the IM box, it’s still very clear; you can really have a dialogue just as you would if you were sitting next to each other.” Consultant D noted the possibility of the written record being reviewed by supervisors: “A printed document gives a whole record and originally I worried that I might get in trouble for things I was saying because you don’t have that ability to quickly get back on track that you have in a face to face. I just stopped thinking that it was a documented record. If I was going to get in trouble, I would have gotten in trouble in my
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observations [by the CWE supervisor]. I threw that worry out the window and do what I usually do in a face-to-face session.”

Consultant B voiced concern about the written record being shared beyond the virtual walls of the CWE: “There’s an added pressure that the student could show the professor and use it against me if they didn’t take my advice the right way. So I’m very careful what I say. Not that I say crazy things, but I write them online the way I would want a professor to see them worded. It’s uncomfortable because some students may not realize that no matter what I say, they are still accountable.” Consultant I voiced a very specific complaint about the chat box: “It’s really confusing to say ‘in the fifth paragraph, the second sentence, do you mean this...?’” Consultant F added: “The problem for me is the size of the text box. You can only see about 15 lines of writing. It gets difficult to follow because it’s not a larger window. So it looks like I’m saying a lot, when in reality, I’m not. From the student side, this could look intimidating, like I’m throwing tons of words at them.” This same consultant’s view also supported the Pre-OWC concern about the challenges writers face when discussing their work in a text-only format: “I know how to communicate in writing, but for the student already struggling with writing that may not necessarily be the case.” Consultant L felt the same was true of consultants: “Sometimes we may not be able to express our ideas quickly on a computer.” Consultant O, said that she had to rethink some of her best practices for them to translate properly in text: “I have to write to the students ‘I don’t want this to sound mean, but it’s the best way I can phrase this for you to see what’s not working.’ I explain my choice of language when I write something about their argument or analysis that seems aggressive, like ‘Who cares?’ or ‘Why does this matter?’”
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One area that consultants agreed upon in the interviews Pre- and Post OWC was the value to the writer who obtains a written transcript from the session. Pre-OWC, Consultant B recognized that "having a transcript that they can print and look at later with all the open-ended questions is good." Consultant C viewed this as an advantage over face to face: "When a student sits with you and listens, they understand it because they are in the moment, but as soon as they leave and come across the first distraction, or if they haven't taken notes, they don't remember the context of the conversation." She compared this added benefit of online transcripts to the tape recorders some students bring to in-person sessions. Consultant G viewed the transcript as "a way a student can look back and reflect or confirm whether or not they heard something or said something." Post-OWC, Consultant O summed up that "[Online sessions] leave a record behind and that's a great learning tool for students."

The following two survey statements broke down textual communication concerns into more specific categories of typos, errors, and modeling of written work.

*Survey (20): I am comfortable with a student seeing some of my mistakes online as I correspond with them.*

The response to this statement showed a marked increase in comfort with students seeing some of the mistakes made during an online session. Pre-OWC, only 57% of the consultants were comfortable with possible typos and grammatical errors made by them as consultants. Post-OWC, 82% were comfortable with the fact that typing quickly during a 25-minute session would cause understandable errors. Pre-OWC, nine of the 16 agreed (six) or strongly agreed (three), four disagreed, and three neither agreed nor disagreed.
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Post-OWC, nine out of 11 agreed (eight) or strongly agreed (one), one neither agreed nor disagreed, and one strongly disagreed.

Survey (21): My written correspondence during an OWC will provide a model of writing for the student.

Although a somewhat even percentage of consultants (32% Pre-OWC and 27% Post-OWC) agreed that their writing during an online session would serve as a model, the percentage that disagreed that their writing online served as an example jumped 12% (from 51% Pre-OWC to 63% Post-OWC). Pre-OWC, five of the 16 consultants (32%) agreed (three) or strongly agreed (two) that the written correspondence online would be a model of writing for the student, three (19%) neither agreed nor disagreed, and eight (51%) disagreed (six) or strongly disagreed (two). Post-OWC, only three consultants agreed that their writing online would provide a model for writers; six disagreed, only one strongly agreed, and one neither agreed nor disagreed.

The need to quickly type in the chat box while keeping it clear and professional was addressed Pre-OWC by many consultants during the interviews: “Am I able to type fast enough? Without typos? In a fluid and elegant manner?” asked Consultant A. “That’s my fear. Here is a student, especially a first-year student, and here is a model of writing for them. I don’t want my pathetic typing to be an example.” Yet the same consultant, Post-OWC stated: “It could be a very important teachable moment. We all have strengths and weaknesses. It may tell them ‘you’re not the only one’ and that every writer comes to the table with strengths and weaknesses.” Consultant C worried Pre-OWC about “making errors in keyboarding because it’s going to send an unprofessional message [and] making spelling mistakes because it doesn’t add to our credibility.” Post-OWC, Consultant H
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related: “I tend to mistype ‘were’ instead of ‘where.’ The student hopefully knows it’s a typo, but I sometimes think ‘Oh no, they’re going to have a copy of this and go back to the powers that be.’” This again indicates that the consultants are not as worried about the writers’ opinions of their conversation online, but rather the opinions of others who might view the exchange.

One recurring concern voiced in the interviews was the silence or inactivity of the writer while the consultant read the paper online. Several well-established in-person techniques were adopted for online, such as these two proposed by Consultant H: “While I read, I tell them to go to our Digital Dashboard and look up central claims or the elements of a research paper. I ask the student to think of a question or two while I’m reading and write it in the chat box.” Post-OWC, Consultant E stated: “I thought it would be awkward online with those blocks of silences you have when you’re reading the document, but the awkwardness doesn’t seem to be there. I tell them to read it again too and think of questions while I look it over.” Consultant I devised a solution to the anxiety produced by silence: “After being asked for the fifth time ‘are you still there?’ while I read their paper, I now type in the chat box, ‘if you see my name up in the participants’ box, I’m still here. If it disappears, I’m not here.’”

The results of the following survey statement revealed some of the discomfort caused by the pauses and the need to come up with the solutions mentioned above.

Survey (28): I will be comfortable during an OWC with the silent pauses that will occur as we contemplate or write.

Phrased this way, the results contradicted the interviews in that a higher percentage of discomfort with the silences while working online was noted. Pre-OWC, 10
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of the 16 believed they could be comfortable with the silences (nine agreed, one strongly agreed), four disagreed, and two neither agreed nor disagreed. After working online for four months, six of the 11 consultants agreed (four) or strongly agreed (twp), three disagreed, and two neither agreed nor disagreed. This showed a decrease in comfort with silence online from 62% Pre-OWC to 54% Post-OWC.

Establishing Online Relationships

The face-to-face relationship is one treasured by writing consultants as voiced strongly during the Pre-OWC interviews. For example, Consultant E was adamant that “human interaction is critical to learning and just from the social perspective, it’s important for people to react with each other physically and intellectually. In some of my face-to-face sessions, Zen-like occurrences happen where you and the writer almost become one brain. You can’t duplicate that online.” Consultant F shared that “the idea of losing the face-to-face rapport made me sick to my stomach. I’m a teacher. I love being in an environment with students and having the ability to talk ideas out and to hold something tangible in my hands.” This initial favoritism toward in-person consultations was summarized by Consultant K: “I’m biased. I really like the free-flowing conversation that occurs when meeting someone face to face; how personable it is and even how individualized it becomes. I think that will be hard to replicate online.” Consultant C noted that “social chit chat will be minimized online because it takes up too much time.” On the other hand, Post-OWC, Consultant D believed that “over time you can form bonds online that are more social in structure.”

Four survey statements identified areas of concern with the new online relationship.
Survey (9): Working online will not change the consultant/student relationship.

Pre-OWC, only one of the 16 consultants strongly agreed with this statement, eight disagreed, and two strongly disagreed, five neither agreed nor disagreed. Post-OWC, out of the 11 consultants who worked online, three agreed that online sessions did not change the consultant/student relationship, three strongly disagreed, three disagreed, and two neither agreed nor disagreed. These numbers show a more positive outlook that relationships can be established online with only 6% agreeing that the online will not change relationships Pre-OWC to 27% (Post-OWC) agreeing that relationships will not change.

Survey (5): The absence of body language/facial expressions during an OWC will not pose a problem to me as a consultant.

The main aspect of change noted when comparing face to face with online sessions was the absence of body language/facial expressions, and verbal cues. Post-OWC results indicated a measurable change in consultants’ perception that the absence of visual and verbal cues did not pose as much of a problem as was predicted Pre-OWC. Only 6% Pre-OWC agreed that the absence of body language would not pose a problem while 27% agreed Post-OWC. The percentage disagreeing (63 Pre-OWC to 54 Post-OWC) also reflected positively on the fact that consultants were adjusting to the text-only format. Before experience online, only one of the 16 consultants agreed, ten disagreed (two strongly disagreed, eight disagreed), and five neither agreed nor disagreed. Once the 11 consultants began to form online relationships, six thought the absence of body language would not pose a problem, three felt it did not pose a problem, and two neither agreed nor disagreed.
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During the Pre-OWC interviews, consultants mentioned body language from two perspectives, theirs and the writers they encounter online. According to Consultant A, “There are plenty of times in a face-to-face session when writers say they understand and I can see from their body language that they don’t.” Consultant B discussed how “if they don’t understand what I mean in person, I can use body language or my hands. I can also see if they are smiling or nodding or if they have that enlightened look on their face. You can’t read that online.” Yet, after consulting online the same consultant admitted: “I prefer online just being chat-based. I would be less comfortable using Skype. In person, you can keep your voices low and the discussion is just between the two of you. With audio/visual technology, I would have to speak louder; I’d feel more on display than doing a text chat.” Consultant C brought up the face-to-face advantage of also reading negative signs: “You can see confusion on a student’s face and maybe think of another way to explain a concept.” Although some consultants were comfortable with the absence of body language, tone of voice was missed online. Consultant C added: “I would give up body language for a voice component. You can hear inflection and hesitation in the voice. You can tell if they are confused. Sometimes silence is body language.” Consultant D discussed how the body language and voice used in person matter to both consultant and the writer they are working with: “Students could be offended by text used in the chat if it doesn’t come out the right way. [In person] you can soften your tone or kind of smile at them. You can lean over a little bit. Body language can show them you’re not being aggressive in your feedback. Online it’s just cold and clear-cut. That may pose a problem for more sensitive writers.” Consultant E insisted: “Personality is not a process; it’s an interaction. When I type comments into a box, I can’t see the writer. In person I can see if
they understood; I can see when they’re struggling. That’s the back and forth, the collaborative relationship, established through body language.” Consultant L worried about the loss of encouragement provided through body language: “Online, even if they are confused, they may type in ‘ok’ but think ‘whatever—I don’t understand what they’re talking about—the hell with it.’ When you’re in front of someone, you can confirm a lot of issues. You can sense frustration through body language even if they don’t verbalize it.” Consultant O summed up: “When facial expressions and body language are lost, communication is tricky. Consultants may sound more authoritative or apathetic depending on the way we write.” Consultant L balanced the argument by stating: “It’s not like personalities don’t come out in writing also. You might get a sense of the person online. It’s just a different perception discovered by just reading each other’s writing.”

Post-OWC, consultants still voiced concern about the absence of body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. Lack of these cues made Consultant E wonder: “When you give them direction, do they pay attention? Do they disregard it? Are they distracted?” Pauses in the text conversation caused concern as expressed by Consultant D: “Are they pausing because they’re having a hard time answering your question or because they have Facebook or another tab open?” Consultant B, offered a suggestion: “Since I can’t read their expression or hear that moment when they say ‘OHHH’ and something just clicks, every time I write something in the text box, I ask them a question about it. ‘Do you know what I mean by that?’ If they type ‘no’ I’ll rephrase it.” Consultant A remarked: “I worked online with a writer who was blocked. In a face to face, I could have displayed body language that encouraged her more. I was encouraging in my language in the chat; it just seemed formal.” Consultant I countered: “I’m kind of
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Glad we have no visual component online; it's unnecessary. Why do we have to look at each other? Seeing the paper is most important."

Survey (13): *I can still use a tension-breaking device such as humor online.*

The response to this survey question demonstrated a marked change in the belief that using humor online was more possible than consultants first perceived. Pre-OWC only 44% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Post-OWC, 63% reported that humor online could be used as a tension-breaking device. Seven of the 16 either agreed or strongly agreed (four, three) that humor could be used online, six disagreed (five) or strongly disagreed (one), and three neither agreed nor disagreed. For the 11 Post-OWC responses, seven agreed (five) or strongly agreed (two), two strongly disagreed, and two neither agreed nor disagreed.

Post-OWC, Consultant B stated: "I still make a joke or say hah-hah versus LOL. I don't use internet jargon with abbreviations. I keep it playful and friendly at times, but universal. When I give an example, I make it silly, about ice cream or something light. I try to get a little laugh out of them because they are anxious. I have to consciously do this online while in person, it's natural." Consultant D favored a relaxed approach online: "One thing that can help you show personality during an [online] session is smiley faces. I use a lot of smiley faces or I'll put stars in the text. I'll type LOL or HAHA. You want the student to know you're a person and not a robot." Consultant F clarified that there are limits: "I always approach online sessions in a jovial way, but I can't be the chipper consultant I normally am. If you ever looked at transcripts of my online sessions, there are smiley faces all over the place, because I want the student to know that it shouldn't be
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intimidating.” Consultant G stated: “Not having a human, face-to-face contact, I think that you have to have a cheery tone to put a writer at ease.”

The Post-OWC interviews also brought up the function of personality online as a conscious choice. As pointed out by Consultant D: “Especially with how random texting is these day, you are either going to be personable or professional. If you decide on professional, it’s going to be a very cold, cut-and-dried, scholarly session. If you choose to be personable, you can put smiley faces or abbreviations like LOL. If you use abbreviations, it’s less intimidating because it’s at their level. I feel it’s important to make students feel that they can be open to you because they don’t know who’s on the other side of the screen.” Beyond the internet lingo, Consultant F added: “I always start a session asking how they are; I don’t just get down to business. I’m a ridiculously fast typist so I can just spew out this conversation.” Consultant B refined this idea by adding that it’s important to encourage the student’s humor too: “I type ha-ha in a session and wait for them to ‘laugh’ back or answer ‘OMG, that’s so funny that you wrote that.’ When a student wrote ‘thank you so much’ with an added smiley face, at least I knew the writer was happy.” Consultants noted that their use of emoticons came from their own personal usage of online social media. Consultant O explained: “I’m always texting or Facebooking anyway, so I just modify that type of expression for a more professional venue. I’m big on emoticons though to let students know I’m smiling and that they’re doing well.” Consultant A, who noted that she does not use online social media, explained that “in person I can use humor in a soft, kind manner and tone. When I teach them about structure, I joke ‘20 years from now you will remember this!’ Or I smile and
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say, ‘this paper doesn’t convince me…try again!’ When I type, I often think, ‘does this sound silly? Is this going to sound judgmental? Is it going to sound chastising?’”

Survey (22): *I feel comfortable with the possibility that I may never meet in person with some of the students I work with online.*

This statement elicited the same percentage (63) Pre- and Post-OWC that agreed that they would be comfortable never meeting the online writers with who they work. Post-OWC, Consultant E was happy to note: “After you develop an online relationship with a writer, you feel connected, almost to the point of a face to face. One woman I work with online talked about coming in to say ‘hello.’ So you can actually develop an online relationship with the writer which really strengthens the interaction and effectiveness.” Several consultants, like Consultant D, stressed that an already established face-to-face relationship translated well to online: “There is someone I worked with in person twice a week during the entire semester. We already knew each other and I didn’t have to worry about sounding too professional or too personable.” Online relationships formed and became valuable to consultants, as explained by Consultant D: “You should put your personality into a session as much as possible. Eventually, you will have repeat students and you’ll form a kind of bond. But you have to present a personality so they’ll respond to you.”

Safe Space, Spontaneity, and Motivation.

A few survey categories did not fit the areas above, but are important in writing center philosophy and best practices. These include: establishing a safe space for writers; creating a space that encourages spontaneity for both consultant and writer; and finding ways to motivate writers. This section will include the responses that address each.
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Survey (19): *I can establish a safe space online where students feel comfortable discussing ideas freely.*

Pre-OWC, all but one of the 16 consultants agreed that a safe space could be established online, and one disagreed. Post-OWC, only six of the 11 consultants agreed, two disagreed, and three neither agreed nor disagreed. Although this marks a large decrease from 94% Pre-OWC who agreed online would provide a safe space to 54% Post-OWC who agreed, not one consultant in the Post-OWC interview mentioned the idea of safe space.

Pre-OWC, consultants hoped online would provide an even more open arena than face to face. "Online I can learn how to respond only to text without prejudice, not only bad prejudice but good prejudice, whether taking a dislike to a student or perhaps feeling sorry for a student," explained Consultant A: "In person, I think I give them the benefit of the doubt when they're nice, sweet, or give me that puppy dog face. If you're only responding to the text, you will not have those other things going on." Consultant N stated: "Removing personality, not that there's a total absence of personality when writing online, but just treating each work without a face, the consultant might be less likely to subconsciously bring the impressions we bring when we meet people." The key word in most interviews was anonymity: "I think a lot of students get really nervous coming here" (Consultant D); or "A writer may be shy or nervous that their essay or writing is being reviewed; although that's not what we do, they may think of it that way. Online is a little safer, so consultants may reach more people online" (Consultant H). Consultant F noted: "A student may have it in their mind that coming to the writing center is a stigma, or that it's a remedial resource and they are embarrassed to come in."
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Online sessions could be an avenue to get the help they need or afraid to ask for, since they will remain anonymous.” Consultant I offered a personal outlook: “As an undergraduate, I never went to a writing center. If there was an availability to not meet face to face and get feedback, I would have tried it. You have anonymity, it’s not confrontational, and you have more freedom from being stressed out unlike the close setting of face to face. If you’re uncomfortable, you just lose your connection; you don’t have to experience it anymore.”

Anonymity was a factor that elicited both negative and positive perceptions from the consultants in the interviews, but the survey did not indicate as much concern:

Survey (24): The level of anonymity online for both student and consultant removes any hesitancy in giving honest feedback.

The quantitative results did not support the opinions gathered in the interviews. The percentage of consultants Pre- and Post-OWC remained somewhat stagnant for this statement. Pre-OWC, only three of 16 consultants agreed that online would provide a platform for more honest feedback than face to face, six disagreed, and seven neither agreed nor disagreed. Post-OWC, only two of the 11 agreed, five disagreed (three) or strongly disagreed (two), and four neither agreed nor disagreed. In percentages the difference would be from 19 to 18% Pre/Post-OWC who agreed and 38 to 45% Pre/Post who disagreed. During the interviews, the consultants seemed more concentrated on the writers’ benefits to anonymity as an encouragement to seek out the writing center, rather than focusing on the consultants’ hesitancy in giving honest feedback.

Pre-OWC, Consultant D thought that difficult or controversial topics could be easier to discuss when not in the room together: “If a student becomes agitated in any
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way, online the consultant's feelings aren't given away by facial expressions or body language because you're typing professional responses. Anonymity in this instance is helpful as well." Consultant M noted: "Writers are able to hide behind a computer and they can use that to their advantage. They are more able to ask questions freely and interact more easily." Some agreed that a safe space online was provided by anonymity, but mentioned the cost: "While it's a benefit to be anonymous and maintain political correctness, you lose some of warmth of face to face that encourages open discussion," said Consultant G: "Online there's more room for sensitive writers to be offended." Pre-OWC, Consultant F projected that "[online] there's going to be less confrontation. The writer will use online out of urgency with more specific questions."

Two questions compared the value of spontaneity online to using scripts.

Survey (7): A prewritten transcript for working with a student online will be helpful.
Survey (8): I can be spontaneous with my observations when responding to students online.

There was little difference in the percentage who agreed Pre-OWC (50%) to Post-OWC (54%). Pre-OWC, eight of the 16 consultants agreed (five) or strongly agreed (three) that a prewritten transcript would be advantageous for consultants; four disagreed, and four neither agreed nor disagreed. Post-OWC, six of the 11 consultants working online agreed (three) or strongly agreed that a script would be helpful; only two disagreed, and three neither agreed nor disagreed.

Responding to spontaneity, there was a drop in the percentage of consultants who agreed they could be spontaneous with their observations online after consulting online for four months (63% Pre-OWC compared to 54% Post-OWC). Perceptions to this
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question before any experience online showed that ten of 16 agreed (seven) or strongly agreed (three) that being spontaneous would not pose a problem, only one disagreed, and five neither agreed nor disagreed. Out of the 11 who worked online, six agreed (four) or strongly agreed (two) they could be spontaneous, four disagreed (two) or strongly disagreed (two), and one neither agreed nor disagreed.

Interview comments referring to the use of scripts versus spontaneous interaction included a response from Consultant A, Pre-OWC, referring to concern with new technology: “How is a dinosaur able to do this? What would be really helpful would be a hard copy template for a session. We were told we’ll have a cut and paste version and that’s cool, but I need a hard copy, a script. I’ll have it with me every day; and I’ll write notes on it and bring it to each session so I don’t have to go from screen to screen to send comments.” Pre-OWC, several consultants either requested a script for online sessions or began to write some of their own. Consultant I “created a list of messages to copy and paste like ‘make sure to take our online survey,’ or ‘make another appointment for your next draft.’” Consultant D added that scripted responses would “truly be an essential part of the online session because it will be incredibly difficult to concentrate.” Post-OWC, Consultant A noted that “as I’ve become more comfortable [online] the exchange with writers became a little more genuine. Earlier it was more mechanical; now I have more banter with them.” Two consultants Post-OWC, agreed that scripts are not necessary or wanted. “I don’t use canned responses; I just type them out in my own words,” stated Consultant B. “I was scared to consult online,” admitted Consultant A, “because when we were first trained and we had to cut and paste responses, I thought ‘I will never!’ Now it’s all in the chat and I’m much more confident.”
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Somewhat related to spontaneity, was the statement:

*Survey (11): My knowledge about a specific discipline/topic covered in a student's paper will be more obvious online.*

Although 13% agreed with this statement Pre-OWC, this concern disappeared Post-OWC to zero percent. Post-OWC, Consultant B acknowledged: “I don’t consider myself an expert on any topic. I give writers help from my experience or as a reader offering the best advice I can.” Pre-OWC Consultant M generalized: “I think being a consultant online or in person is about knowledge. Expressing and sharing that knowledge to the student, the writer, gives me confidence.” Consultants’ specific knowledge about lower-order concerns was mentioned by Consultant B, Post-OWC: “I worry when a professor sends students here for grammar and they could show the professor that I don’t know what a dangling modifier is.”

Beyond the very specific concerns of safe space and spontaneity was an important overall apprehension about motivating writers during an online session.

*Survey (14): I can motivate a student writer online, just as I can in person*

Post-OWC consultants reported an increase in their ability to motivate in comparison to their preconception that motivating a student online would be difficult. Pre-OWC, seven of the 16 agreed (five) or strongly agreed (two) to the statement, five disagreed, and four neither agreed nor disagreed. This translates to 44% Pre-OWC who believed they could motivate a student writer online, just as they can in person. Post-OWC, the percentage increased to 54%. Six of the 11 online consultants agreed (five) or strongly agreed (one), and two neither agreed nor disagreed. Pre-OWC none of the
consultants strongly disagreed with this statement, yet Post-OWC, three of the 11
strongly disagreed.

In the interview discussions, many consultants expressed the need to recognize
that each writer logs on to an online session with individual strengths, weaknesses,
backgrounds, and needs, just as they do when they visit the CWE in person. Pre-OWC,
Consultant D explained: “You have to consider the kind of learner you’re working
with—not everyone is a reading learner. Some students really need to hear [the
discussion of their paper]. Many are more comfortable with face to face, especially if
they are audio learners.” The same consultant brought up multilingual writers: “A very
important group that needs face to face is second-language learners. I notice that they can
be hesitant and shy, this is generalizing, but they don’t necessarily want to tell you they
don’t understand.” Speaking about motivation in general, Consultant O expressed
concern that “the student may only be making online appointments because it’s easier.
We may come across apathetic students who want us to simply do the work for them.”
Consultant D stated that because online sessions “do not holistically represent the extent
to which we can give feedback and help them, it’s more ideal for students who have
already been to the writing center, or advanced writers, thinkers, readers.”

Post-OWC also revealed some of the same observations. Consultant I said: “If
you get a good writer online, you can have a good session; if you don’t it’s going to be
harder to motivate them.” Very specific audiences and their unique needs were
expounded upon by Consultant F: “My audience has been 105 and 106 [First-Year
Writing] students. I know that there are specific topics taught in those classes and specific
objectives that need to be met. They may already have problems writing what they mean.
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It seems that asking someone to write about a writing problem they have in a written text box is silly. They're already struggling in writing and we're asking them to write what they think in a discussion.” Consultant B added: “You always have that 1% that only wants to vent; they don’t want to be there and they aren’t motivated. In person, it’s easier to discuss what the problem is and engage them to get more involved. Even if it really comes down to getting them to hold the pencil while you say ‘ok, let’s go over this.’ If this happens online, I have had times where I just can’t wait for a session to be over.” Consultant J stated: “Since it’s really a collaborative process, both parties must bring something to it. If the writer says, ‘yeah, I’m just going to have them do x for me’ it becomes one-sided and it’s hard to break through that mentality in an IM. I have a harder time shepherding someone into an activity online rather than in person.”

Discussion and Analysis

The “Perceptions” study established three important points: Writing center goals do not have to be changed for technology; technology can assist and enhance writing center best practices and methods; and writing consultants can provide valuable insight in evaluating, adopting, rejecting, altering, and/or embracing technology with writers’ needs in mind. Introducing technology into a writing center can change dynamics in relationships between writers and consultants and can also make ingrained and proven best practices come into question. Not surprisingly, the survey statements that addressed the areas of relationships and best practices yielded the most marked differences in consultants’ opinions before and after their online experience. Before consulting online, wariness existed about the ability to connect with a writer when visual and audio were nonexistent. After experience online, consultants began to develop ways to not only
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convey their tone, whether caring or humorous, but also to establish a balance that allowed for both the traditional dialogic conversation espoused by Coogan (1999) and the more directive methods outlined by Hewitt (2010). Methods and best practices originally thought to be nontransferable from an in-person session to a virtual one, often worked just as well online. Consultants used the new space of a chat box to ask the questions they would have posed in person in order to elicit deeper analysis, or to prompt a student to revise a central claim by typing it into the essay’s introduction on the larger display screen.

The journey into online consultation by the 16 participants in the “Perceptions” study did cause a disruption for consultants who value the face-to-face contact; yet, this journey also provided an impetus for consultants to review their methodologies, and to reaffirm or revise their views about composition theories and writing center philosophy. The consultants’ attention to revising best practices in order to meet online applications reflected the online consulting responsibilities set forth by Burnett (2003): developing a supportive atmosphere, maintaining focus, and promoting discussion. After four months working online, most consultants not only adjusted to online sessions, but also filtered and refined their best practices through a new virtual lens. In this virtual arena, gestures, voice, and tone were absent. Consultants’ face-to-face methods either worked online and their successes continued, or failed, necessitating the creation of new methods. This positive approach to making online consultation work conflicted with the findings of DeVoss (1997), who reported a discord between writing center goals and “Internet” consulting. Consultants speculated that decades after the introduction of online writing sessions, students and consultants are more acclimated to technology, including
relationships formed through social media. The survey asked participants about their overall personal use of technology: 100% text; 56% own a Smartphone; 88% participate in Facebook/social media; 44% Tweet; 69% write blog entries; and 63% have taken/used online courses, Wikis, and hypertext. This ease and enjoyment of technology fostered the consultants’ confidence that new relationships could be established and best practices could be redesigned if necessary to meet the needs of an online visitor to the writing center.

As with all new experiences, the misalignment between expectations and reality caused some of the challenges faced by consultants. Curtis and Roskams (2000) called upon consultants to clearly state to writers what can and cannot be accomplished online in order to minimize the frustration. In the CWE, for example, before consultants worked online, they agreed that the new virtual platform should be used only for very specific questions from writers and would best serve more advanced writers. This requirement would ensure a successful session as described by Hewitt (2010) in that consultations would become more “teacherly” with students asking very specific questions and consultants giving answers, advice, and links to resources. It would also heed the advice of Harris and Pemberton (1995) to resist replicating a face-to-face session. However, as technology-immersed first year student writers heard of the online offering, they reserved virtual sessions with the same ease and comfort as joining Facebook. Consultants rose to the challenge and worked their way through usual requests, one session at a time, such as: “Can you just read my paper and tell me what you think;” and “Can you proofread my paper.” They often noted that, even during an in-person session, consultants must clarify
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

the limitations of the 25-minute time constraint and also explain the benefits to students
of only working on one or two items rather than an entire checklist of suggestions.

When frustration by the consultants was expressed, the concerns often mirrored
the same challenges of face-to-face sessions, a study conclusion also noted by De Smet et
al. (2009). For example, a large decrease was noted in consultants’ online ability to
emphasize higher order (global) concerns such as organization and analysis before
addressing lower order (local) concerns such as grammar and punctuation. There was
also a significant drop in the percentage of consultants who believed they could address
the writing process during an online session in addition to addressing the product (paper).

Although there was frustration voiced by the consultants, there was also a renewed
necessity to analyze sessions in order to find out what works. They began to establish
rewarding online relationships with all populations of writers, from entering freshmen to
graduate students as well as faculty, staff, and alumni, that allowed for discussion beyond
proofreading and critiquing a student’s work.

This intense self-analysis slightly varied from the historical precedent mentioned
by Palmquist (2003) of “initial enthusiasm, cautious assessment, and qualified success.”
A majority of participants in the study, although well-entrenched in technology, were
very vocal in their favoritism toward face-to-face consultation. In the interviews, all of
the participants, regardless of age or technical experience, saw themselves as digital
immigrants (Prensky, 2001) who were not born using technology at an early age but had
to adopt and adapt to the virtual world. This may account for a surprising survey result:
After four months online, there was a marked decrease in the percentage of consultants
who believed that online writing sessions are necessary to meet the needs of today’s
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

students. Many consultants stubbornly defended and preferred face-to-face consultations, although they tended to agree with Consultant C that “the online component is relevant to the lifestyle of our students.” Rather than enthusiasm, the consultants’ willingness to work online was fueled by a belief that virtual opportunities must be offered in order to reach more writers.

While consultants spent time discussing the importance of online offerings for students, very few of the interviewees mentioned any added benefits for themselves as online consultants. One mentioned learning patience; two mentioned valuable experience for the growing field of virtual teaching/consulting; and many dreamed of consulting from home in their pajamas in the future. Other than these noted benefits for consultants, their focus was entirely on the benefits to the writers with whom they meet and collaborate. The most important perceived benefit of online writing consultation prior to conducting online sessions was the ability for the writing center to extend access and reach more students, faculty, staff, and alumni writers. Consultants also gave favorable ratings in the survey and positive comments in the interviews to the online benefit of a recorded, saved session that writers could refer back to when revising their papers. A large percentage of consultants agreed that online synchronous sessions would be most beneficial when writers logged on with specific questions or a section of their paper to address. For themselves, they initially saw the necessity for a prewritten script to help them adhere as closely to initial greetings and wrap-up items that they were comfortable with during in-person consultations.

The perceived drawbacks of online writing consultation prior to OWC experience included the absence of audio/visual cues; difficulty conveying their personality online
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

and developing virtual relationships; the length of the session (25 minutes); the lack of
clarity and understanding between consultant and writer due to the absence of visual
cues, body language, and tone; and the sole reliance on written-only questions/responses.
Specific worry was voiced about the ability to conduct a brainstorming session. Pre-
OWC, consultants also thought extensively about how they were perceived online by
student writers or faculty members with whom a student might share the transcript. They
also worried about their casual writing being misinterpreted as a model for academic
papers or, more generally, if their quickly typed responses would be clear to the writer.

After four months of OWC experience, the reported benefits of synchronous
online consultation echoed the original perceived opportunity for outreach beyond the
physical walls of the CWE, as well as the advantages of the written report. However,
some unexpected benefits were also discovered. Consultants noted that the written-only
form of communication encouraged more writing, even in the small chat box. Although
the absence of audio and visual was difficult, consultants found that even students who
struggled with writing seemed comfortable with the more casual dialogue in the chat box.
Through the use of not only casual dialogue and friendly welcomes online, but also
emoticons and text abbreviations, such as LOL (laugh out loud), positive virtual
relationships were being developed and consultants felt as though their personalities
(understanding, funny, capable, professional, friendly) could be represented in a session.
The worry about students sharing the transcript with professors or administrators reading
the account disappeared or lessened as they focused on the relationship between
consultant and writer. Consultants embraced the anonymity of the online platform, which
took away any judgments about the writer, good or bad; but, many noted that the “safe
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

space” concept so engrained in writing center philosophy seemed unnecessary as students did not use online sessions as a vehicle to complain, rant, or state controversial opinions. To date, consultants reported interesting chats in the dialogue box, but no arguing or controversy as experienced in some face-to-face sessions.

Because of the lively dialogic chat, consultants who previously believed that brainstorming would be difficult without face-to-face cues and methods reported that this stage in the writing process was very successful online. Once technical glitches were addressed and remedied by WCOnline, voiced feelings of failure disappeared and gave way to more discussion of adapting and developing best online practices. Many consultants became more confident in sharing knowledge (if not on a topic, at least on how a writer can question and form a written opinion on a topic), providing a model for writing, and even making mistakes and modeling the human side of writing as one filled with errors, revisions, and editing. “Comfort” was a word used more Post-OWC than “confidence” as consultants found themselves more at ease online with spelling errors, silences, balancing direction with collaboration, and spending time during sessions explaining writing processes or sitting back and allowing students to freewrite. For consultants themselves, prewritten transcripts that were originally seen as necessary were replaced by spontaneous online conversations. This preference for spontaneity did not concur with Breuch and Racine (2000) who favored standard scripts for online sessions.

Even after four months of experience online and more expressed confidence, consultants who chose to meet with writers virtually still reported drawbacks and concerns. Two major roadblocks to online success were continued expectations for proofreading rather than discussing HOCs and the reluctance or inability of writers to log
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

on with specific questions/areas to address. “Expectation” was a key word in many interviews, both in regard to the writer and the consultant. As stated by Consultant C post-OWC, “face to face and online are NOT created equal; you can’t treat them as the same thing. It puts the consultant and the student at a disadvantage to set up that expectation.” The expectations of addressing many concerns in one online session and the urgency felt by consultants often led to hastily written suggestions, misinterpretation, and what would be considered an unsuccessful session.

The delicate balance between authority and collaboration was also challenging to navigate and consultants questioned if the online platform made it more difficult to keep sessions student-centered and less directive on the part of the consultant. The engagement of less motivated students online also posed a problem when encouragement, prodding, and cajoling seemed to get lost in cyberspace, and a student could literally disappear by hitting the ‘x’ at the top of the screen. It should be noted that consultants admitted that many of the aforementioned drawbacks were often encountered during face-to-face sessions. Two complaints were voiced in many interviews: time constraints that made it difficult to address multiple issues and exhaustion due to the competing need for a consultant to read, critique, think, type, and try to sound friendly and professional all at the same time. One very specific area of concern in addressing writing process and HOC issues was organization. In person, many of the best practices of reverse outlines, webbing, color coding, and one-sentence summaries for each paragraph did not translate well to online.

Sometimes perceived success online was strongly tied to the details that comprise a session: Did the consultant see the red block that indicated the appointment and did
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

she/he log on promptly? Was the writer on time? Did the consultant ask about their goals for a session and were the goals or progress towards them met? Did the consultant encourage the writer's ideas? Was the focus kept on one or two areas (less is more) rather than overwhelming the writer? These day-to-day, session-to-session concerns, when met, enhanced the online experience for consultants. On the other hand, many consultants looked beyond to a more global area of importance by asking: Although online sessions provided access to more writers, do online offerings by the writing center provide access for all writers?

A recurring anomaly in both the surveys and especially the interviews was the breadth of opinions by consultants who continued the face-to-face arguments about collaboration, plagiarism, and authority/power in writing centers. The interviews brought new insight into how these more philosophical and ethical ideas could be discussed through a virtual lens. Often, consultants contradicted their opinions during the interview as they thought about successful vs. unsuccessful sessions and/or contradicted the survey results as they became more confident that they could consult successfully online. More so, they gained a conscious awareness of how they could access their face-to-face practices and reinvent or reject them for online sessions. Like the writers, consultants noticed that online sessions “really make us think about language and its usage” (Consultant A). Again, this echoed DeVoss’ (2002) belief that writing consultants could be at the forefront in assessing text and language used online. Even though all surveys and interviews were confidential, the lively dialogue and disagreements on how a session should be conducted online mirrored the CWE philosophy of the importance of individuality for consultants and writers, as well as the uniqueness of each individual
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

appointment and work discussed. The CWE goal to meet writers where they are in their development and help them grow as writers was always mentioned by each consultant in terms of success during the institution of synchronous online consultation.

Implications

While the “Perceptions” study results apply to one writing center, they have implications that can be valuable to many centers. They can: Provide information for more thorough training of consultants; institute campus and community outreach to tout the benefits of online sessions for students, faculty, staff, and alumni writers; indicate ways to assess online writing consultation; compile new or revised best practices to meet the needs of online consultants and writers; and present the survey results to a wider audience in order to join the ongoing conversation about technology in writing centers.

To date, several of these areas of turning the research into practice and outreach have been originated. Starting in August of 2012, a two-hour component for online consulting was developed and added to the CWE training sessions (See Appendix A). This included theoretical readings (Burnett 2003, Hewitt 2010), freewriting about online perceptions for current and new consultants, an open discussion forum, and one-on-one sessions to brainstorm solutions to specific online challenges. As a result of ideas that evolved from the training, a new log of “CWE Best Practices for Online Consultation” has been compiled and will be available in the center as well as on the CWE Blackboard community. To address the need for more outreach, a proposed marketing plan to inform the campus about the availability of online sessions has been developed (see Appendix B). This marketing plan includes outreach through web and email, print, and event-based ideas. Presentation to a wider audience has been achieved in four venues:
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

- International Writing Centers Association (IWCA), San Diego, CA, October 25, 2012 (Prezi presentation and Q&A of research results)

- Graduate Research Network, Computers & Writing Conference 2012, North Carolina State University, May 17, 2012 (oral presentation and roundtable review of research)

- Montclair State University 2012 Student Research Symposium, Montclair State University, April 22, 2012 (poster presentation, see Appendix C)

- Applying to the IRB and the Research Process for “Perceptions of Writing Consultants Towards Online Writing Consultation, February 2011 (classroom presentation for Jessica Restaino’s Research Methods class)

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study are:

- the small sampling of 16 participants Pre-OWC and 11 participants Post-OWC, rather than a large survey of hundreds of writing center consultants;

- the survey results Pre- and Post-OWC could not be directly matched since only 11 of 16 consultants opted to consult online;

- the limited number of sessions facilitated by consultants in the four months of new experience;

- the technology update during the study erased some of the negative perceptions towards online consulting when the frustration of uploading papers was removed and consultants could concentrate on their online best practices rather than computer problems;

- the absence of student opinions about online synchronous sessions;
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

- the involvement of the primary researcher as an online consultant who discussed the online format with coworkers on a daily basis;
- the enormity of the topics covered (five areas plus miscellaneous concerns) and the thirty survey questions may have broached too many areas of concern as the consultants and the CWE adjusted to the online format;
- the interviewees with negative opinions tended to be very vocal in their strong dislike of online consultation; while other with less negative opinions seemed to be successfully working through some of their online anxiety and voice a more “let’s wait and see” attitude or “this may not be a problem as have more online appointments.”

Conclusions and Further Study

Technology in writing centers was once reliant on administrative directives and the budgets to match (Coogan, 1999; Hawisher, LeBlanc, Moran & Selse, 1996; Huot & Neal, 2006, Palmquist, 2003). With the open access of the Internet, any writer can log onto GoogleDocs or an online chat and discuss a paper or ideas with other writers at little to no cost. Writing centers have the advantage of readily available technology, but must still answer to university administrators and adhere to the mission of their institution. The Center for Writing Excellence at Montclair State University took its own unique journey into cyberspace to reach more students and expand its offerings (Appendix D). This study, Perceptions of Writing Consultants Towards Online Consultation, was part of that journey and serves as a permanent record of the experiences of the CWE. Research pertaining to online consultation can continue to provide many opportunities to advance the field, helping both consultants and the writers they meet in the virtual realm. With
this in mind, some topics for further study, inspired by consultant comments during the interviews include:

- How well does online consultation work for writers who are auditory learners, or students who are timid, stigmatized, unmotivated, or frustrated with writing? What are the advantages/disadvantages for multilingual writers or writers with learning disabilities when they meet a consultant online?
- As stated positively by Consultant A (Pre-OWC): “What are the strengths of the online model and how do we as consultants capitalize on these strengths?”
- Since they comprise a large portion of the writing center client population, how can the unique group of First-Year Writing students be helped by online consultation or other technology?
- How can writing centers ensure that all writers, including urban, underserved, multilingual, or rural populations, can gain access to online sessions?
- Does the continuity of working with the same consultant online lead to a more beneficial outcome for the writer and a stronger online relationship between consultant/writer?
- Should online sessions be assessed in the same manner as a writing center’s face-to-face visits are assessed?
- After determining specific areas of concern (i.e. the higher-order concern of organization) during online consultations, how can new best practices be developed?
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• How can training be designed for not only learning online technology mechanics, but also addressing theory and best practices for online consultation while encouraging consultants to keep an open, positive attitude?

Beyond providing a foundation for future study in the more specific areas bulleted above, the “Perceptions” study yielded other positive results. By filling out the surveys and participating in the interviews, consultants began to not only verbalize challenges, but often began to formulate solutions to share with their administrators and colleagues and use during sessions with writers. This further refined and improved online sessions and also led to training ideas instituted in the summer following the study’s conclusion. The study also prompted participants to analyze their strengths and weaknesses in face-to-face sessions, compare those to their online abilities, and make changes for improvement when necessary. Because I served as the primary researcher, I also became a contact person for ideas for success, tips, and drawbacks that could be discussed and solved as a team. When this discussion, even with complaints, continued after the completion of the surveys and interviews, enthusiasm for online consultation, or at least a willingness to devise solutions, was conveyed to newly hired consultants.
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Results for the survey were gathered using a Likert Scale questionnaire rating for 30 statements.

PRE-OWC: Perceptions of Writing Center Consultants Towards Online Writing Consultation (OWC)

(Note: The PRE-OWC results are based on the responses of 16 CWE writing consultants)

1. I am confident that I can conduct a writing consultation online rather than in person.
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>7 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>5 (31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no answer</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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</table>

2. I am comfortable with the level of technological experience needed to conduct an OWC.

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<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>6 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>8 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no answer</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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</table>

3. The methods I use in a face-to-face consultation will greatly change for an online session.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</td>
<td>3 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>9 (56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>3 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no answer</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. I am comfortable that my comments to a student will be in writing during an OWC.
   1=Strongly Disagree 0 (0%)
   2=Disagree 2 (13%)
   3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 2 (13%)
   4=Agree 6 (38%)
   5=Strongly Agree 6 (38%)
   no answer 0 (0%)

5. The absence of body language/facial expressions during an OWC will not pose a problem to me as a consultant.
   1=Strongly Disagree 2 (13%)
   2=Disagree 8 (50%)
   3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 5 (31%)
   4=Agree 1 (6%)
   5=Strongly Agree 0 (0%)
   no answer 0 (0%)

6. The amount of time needed for an OWC will be equal to that of a face-to-face consultation.
   1=Strongly Disagree 6 (38%)
   2=Disagree 5 (31%)
   3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 2 (13%)
   4=Agree 3 (19%)
   5=Strongly Agree 0 (0%)
   no answer 0 (0%)

7. A prewritten transcript for working with a student online will be helpful.
   1=Strongly Disagree 0 (0%)
   2=Disagree 4 (25%)
   3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 4 (25%)
   4=Agree 5 (31%)
   5=Strongly Agree 3 (19%)
   no answer 0 (0%)

8. I can be spontaneous with my observations when responding to
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>No Answer</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9. Working online will not change the consultant/student relationship.</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
<td>8 (50%)</td>
<td>5 (31%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. There will be more emphasis online with lower-order writing concerns (LOCs) such as grammar.</td>
<td>5 (31%)</td>
<td>7 (44%)</td>
<td>3 (19%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. My knowledge about a specific discipline/topic covered in a student’s paper will be more obvious online.</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>7 (44%)</td>
<td>6 (38%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. I will be able to keep emphasis on high order concerns (HOCs), such as organization and content, in the student’s paper during an online session.</td>
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### Perceptions Towards Online Writing Consultation

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>No Answer</th>
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<td>13. I can still use a tension-breaking device such as humor online.</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>5 (31%)</td>
<td>4 (25%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 (19%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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<td>14. I can motivate a student writer online, just as I can in person.</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>5 (31%)</td>
<td>4 (25%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>5 (31%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
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<td>15. I will need to make more deliberate choices in wording with my</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
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<td>6 (38%)</td>
<td>7 (44%)</td>
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<td>responses to students' papers online because my response will create a</td>
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<td>written record.</td>
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<td>16. I will be able to address the importance of the writing process</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
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<td>online.</td>
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<td>PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION</td>
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<td>3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree <strong>2</strong> (13%)</td>
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<td>4=Agree <strong>8</strong> (50%)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5=Strongly Agree <strong>5</strong> (31%)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>no answer <strong>0</strong> (0%)</td>
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</table>

17. **Prewriting exercises such as brainstorming can just as easily be conducted online as in person.**

| 1=Strongly Disagree **0** (0%)                  |
| 2=Disagree **10** (63%)                         |
| 3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree **3** (19%)        |
| 4=Agree **1** (6%)                              |
| 5=Strongly Agree **2** (13%)                    |
| no answer **0** (0%)                            |

18. **I will be able to guide students through specific steps on how to improve drafts during an online session.**

| 1=Strongly Disagree **0** (0%)                  |
| 2=Disagree **2** (13%)                          |
| 3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree **3** (19%)        |
| 4=Agree **7** (44%)                             |
| 5=Strongly Agree **4** (25%)                    |
| no answer **0** (0%)                            |

19. **I can establish a safe space online where students feel comfortable discussing ideas freely.**

| 1=Strongly Disagree **0** (0%)                  |
| 2=Disagree **1** (6%)                           |
| 3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree **0** (0%)         |
| 4=Agree **2** (56%)                             |
| 5=Strongly Agree **6** (38%)                    |
| no answer **0** (0%)                            |

20. **I am comfortable with a student seeing some of my mistakes online as I correspond with them.**

| 1=Strongly Disagree **0** (0%)                  |
| 2=Disagree **4** (25%)                         |
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 3 (19%)
4=Agree 6 (38%)
5=Strongly Agree 3 (19%)
no answer 0 (0%)

21. My written correspondence during an OWC will provide a model of writing for the student.
1=Strongly Disagree 2 (13%)
2=Disagree 6 (38%)
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 3 (19%)
4=Agree 3 (19%)
5=Strongly Agree 2 (13%)
no answer 0 (0%)

22. I feel comfortable with the possibility that I may never meet in person with some of the students I work with online.
1=Strongly Disagree 0 (0%)
2=Disagree 2 (13%)
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 4 (25%)
4=Agree 7 (44%)
5=Strongly Agree 3 (19%)
no answer 0 (0%)

23. There may be some students who need to come into the CWE for an in-person session if his/her writing concerns cannot be addressed online.
1=Strongly Disagree 0 (0%)
2=Disagree 1 (6%)
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 2 (13%)
4=Agree 6 (38%)
5=Strongly Agree 7 (44%)
no answer 0 (0%)

24. The level of anonymity online for both student and consultant removes any hesitancy in giving honest feedback.
1=Strongly Disagree 0 (0%)
2=Disagree 6 (38%)
### PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

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<th>Scale</th>
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<td>5=Strongly Agree</td>
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**25. Digital communication is as relevant as oral communication.**

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<th>Scale</th>
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<td>4=Agree</td>
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<td>5=Strongly Agree</td>
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**26. I will be able to encourage students to explore their ideas in an online session without interjecting my own ideas.**

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<th>Scale</th>
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<td>2=Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree</td>
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<td>4=Agree</td>
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<td>5=Strongly Agree</td>
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**27. I am comfortable giving both positive and negative feedback online.**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
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<tr>
<td>1=Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>2=Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<td>4=Agree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>5=Strongly Agree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>38%</td>
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<tr>
<td>no answer</td>
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**28. I will be comfortable during an OWC with the silent pauses that will occur as we contemplate or write.**

<table>
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<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>13%</td>
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<tr>
<td>4=Agree</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>56%</td>
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</table>
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

5=Strongly Agree 1 (6%) □
no answer 0 (0%)

29. OWCs are necessary in order to meet the needs of today’s students.
1=Strongly Disagree 0 (0%)
2=Disagree 0 (0%)
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 2 (13%) □
4=Agree 5 (31%) □
5=Strongly Agree 9 (56%) □
no answer 0 (0%)

30. I have/use the following:
Smartphone 9 (56%) □
Texting 16 (100%) □
Facebook (social network) 14 (88%) □
Twitter 7 (44%) □
Blogging 11 (69%) □
Online Courses 10 (63%) □
Wikis 10 (63%) □
Hypertext/Links 10 (63%) □

POST-OWC: Perceptions of Writing Center Consultants Towards Online Writing Consultation (OWC)

Note: The POST-OWC survey results are based on the responses of 11 CWE writing consultants

1. I am confident that I can conduct a writing consultation online rather than in person.
1=Strongly Disagree 1 (9%) □
2=Disagree 0 (0%)
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 2 (18%) □
4=Agree 3 (27%) □
5=Strongly Agree 5 (45%) □
no answer 0 (0%)
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

2. I am comfortable with the level of technological experience needed to conduct an OWC.
   1=Strongly Disagree 0 (0%)
   2=Disagree 0 (0%)
   3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 1 (9%)  
   4=Agree 3 (27%)
   5=Strongly Agree 7 (64%)
   no answer 0 (0%)

3. The methods I use in a face-to-face consultation will greatly change for an online session.
   1=Strongly Disagree 1 (9%)
   2=Disagree 2 (18%)
   3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 2 (18%)
   4=Agree 2 (18%)
   5=Strongly Agree 4 (36%)
   no answer 0 (0%)

4. I am comfortable that my comments to a student will be in writing during an OWC.
   1=Strongly Disagree 0 (0%)
   2=Disagree 0 (0%)
   3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 3 (27%)
   4=Agree 3 (27%)
   5=Strongly Agree 5 (45%)
   no answer 0 (0%)

5. The absence of body language/facial expressions during an OWC will not pose a problem to me as a consultant.
   1=Strongly Disagree 4 (36%)
   2=Disagree 2 (18%)
   3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 2 (18%)
   4=Agree 3 (27%)
   5=Strongly Agree 0 (0%)
   no answer 0 (0%)

6. The amount of time needed for an OWC will be equal to that
of a face-to-face consultation.
1=Strongly Disagree 6 (55%)
2=Disagree 2 (18%)
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 2 (18%)
4=Agree 1 (9%)
5=Strongly Agree 0 (0%)
no answer 0 (0%)

7. A prewritten transcript for working with a student online will be helpful.
1=Strongly Disagree 0 (0%)
2=Disagree 2 (18%)
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 3 (27%)
4=Agree 3 (27%)
5=Strongly Agree 3 (27%)
no answer 0 (0%)

8. I can be spontaneous with my observations when responding to students online.
1=Strongly Disagree 2 (18%)
2=Disagree 2 (18%)
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 1 (9%)
4=Agree 4 (36%)
5=Strongly Agree 2 (18%)
no answer 0 (0%)

9. Working online will not change the consultant/student relationship.
1=Strongly Disagree 3 (27%)
2=Disagree 3 (27%)
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 2 (18%)
4=Agree 3 (27%)
5=Strongly Agree 0 (0%)
no answer 0 (0%)

10. There will be more emphasis online with lower-order writing concerns (LOCs) such as grammar.
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

11. My knowledge about a specific discipline/topic covered in a student’s paper will be more obvious online.

1=Strongly Disagree  4 (36%)  
2=Disagree  4 (36%)  
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree  2 (18%)  
4=Agree  0 (0%)  
5=Strongly Agree  1 (9%)  
no answer  0 (0%)

12. I will be able to keep emphasis on high order concerns (HOCs), such as organization and content, in the student’s paper during an online session.

1=Strongly Disagree  1 (9%)  
2=Disagree  6 (55%)  
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree  4 (36%)  
4=Agree  4 (36%)  
5=Strongly Agree  2 (18%)  
no answer  0 (0%)

13. I can still use a tension-breaking device such as humor online.

1=Strongly Disagree  2 (18%)  
2=Disagree  0 (0%)  
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree  2 (18%)  
4=Agree  5 (45%)  
5=Strongly Agree  2 (18%)  
no answer  0 (0%)

14. I can motivate a student writer online, just as I can in person.
15. I will need to make more deliberate choices in wording with my responses to students’ papers online because my response will create a written record.

1=Strongly Disagree 2 (18%)
2=Disagree 1 (9%)
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 3 (27%)
4=Agree 4 (36%)
5=Strongly Agree 2 (18%)

16. I will be able to address the importance of the writing process online.

1=Strongly Disagree 1 (9%)
2=Disagree 1 (9%)
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 3 (27%)
4=Agree 4 (36%)
5=Strongly Agree 2 (18%)

17. Prewriting exercises such as brainstorming can just as easily be conducted online as in person.

1=Strongly Disagree 2 (18%)
2=Disagree 4 (36%)
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 1 (9%)
4=Agree 2 (18%)
5=Strongly Agree 2 (18%)

18. I will be able to guide students through specific steps on how to improve drafts during an online session.
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

19. I can establish a safe space online where students feel comfortable discussing ideas freely.
   1=Strongly Disagree 0 (0%)
   2=Disagree 2 (18%)
   3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 3 (27%)
   4=Agree 4 (36%)
   5=Strongly Agree 2 (18%)
   no answer 0 (0%)

20. I am comfortable with a student seeing some of my mistakes online as I correspond with them.
   1=Strongly Disagree 1 (9%)
   2=Disagree 0 (0%)
   3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 1 (9%)
   4=Agree 8 (73%)
   5=Strongly Agree 1 (9%)
   no answer 0 (0%)

21. My written correspondence during an OWC will provide a model of writing for the student.
   1=Strongly Disagree 1 (9%)
   2=Disagree 6 (55%)
   3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree 1 (9%)
   4=Agree 3 (27%)
   5=Strongly Agree 0 (0%)
   no answer 0 (0%)

22. I feel comfortable with the possibility that I may never meet in person with some of the students I work with online.
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<th>1=Strongly Disagree</th>
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<th>4=Agree</th>
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<td>24. The level of anonymity online for both student and consultant removes any hesitancy in giving honest feedback.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (18%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Digital communication is as relevant as oral communication.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1 (9%)</td>
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PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

1=Strongly Disagree  
2=Disagree  
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree  
4=Agree  
5=Strongly Agree  
no answer

27. I am comfortable giving both positive and negative feedback online.

1=Strongly Disagree  
2=Disagree  
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree  
4=Agree  
5=Strongly Agree  
no answer

28. I will be comfortable during an OWC with the silent pauses that will occur as we contemplate or write.

1=Strongly Disagree  
2=Disagree  
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree  
4=Agree  
5=Strongly Agree  
no answer

29. OWCs are necessary in order to meet the needs of today’s students.

1=Strongly Disagree  
2=Disagree  
3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree  
4=Agree  
5=Strongly Agree  
no answer

30. I have/use the following:

Smartphone  

5 (45%)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<tr>
<td>Texting</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>(91%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook (social network)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>(82%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogging</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>(73%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Courses</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>(64%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wikis</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>(64%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hypertext/Links</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>(64%)</td>
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In January 2011, when consultants at the Center for Writing Excellence at Montclair State University initially trained to conduct online synchronous sessions the newly acquired WCOnline platform, the training focused mainly on the technical usage of the online module. A PowerPoint with screens describing the steps to access and use the software was reviewed and consultants worked in pairs of two on computers to simulate the uploading of the document and role play communicating solely by text.

Reviewing the results of the Perceptions study, new training for online consulting was developed and led by the primary researcher, Janet Dengel, at the 2012 CWE training retreat. Following is the agenda for the training.
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

2012 Center for Writing Excellence Training Retreat
Online Consultation Agenda
Time: One hour
Date: August 30, 2012

Agenda

I. Freewrite about online experiences or perceptions
II. Share ideas about methods that work, challenges, and tips
III. Work on a list of best practices online for CWE
IV. Discuss two readings focusing on theory and best practices
   a) Chapter Seven, “Using what works” from The online writing conference: A guide for teachers and tutors, by Beth L. Hewitt
V. Discuss a few of the recent CWE research findings from Janet’s project
VI. Model/brainstorm ways to address a few online scenarios

Possible Scenarios

I. You are working with a writer who does not participate fully in the session. They may write back in the chat box short replies such as “okay, thanks,” but it seems like the writer was not really present at all for the session. They don’t offer much in the way of questions or conversation and seem to let you do all the talking (face to face) or typing (online). What are some strategies/solutions?

II. A writer is obviously interested in getting you to proofread his/her paper rather than discussing any higher-order concerns, even though they are present and need to be addressed. How do you get around the grammar dilemma online or face to face?

III. For online sessions, we ask the writer to come prepared with one or two specific areas to work on or questions they have. When they say (face to face) or write (in the chat box), “Can you just read my paper and tell me what you think?” how can we get them to assume more authority over their work?

VII. Communication online can be a unique challenge when voice inflections and verbal cues are not available and tone does not always translate. How can we improve how we “sound” to the writer to make sure our feedback is clear and accurately conveyed? What can we do online (or face to face) when a writer does not seem to understand questions/suggestions? Model/brainstorm ways to address a few online scenarios
Outreach to introduce the availability of online writing consultation to the full campus community of writers, including students, faculty, staff, and alumni, will continue to be an important component in the success of online writing consultation at Montclair State University. Following is a three-phase marketing plan which encompasses ideas for Web/email, print, and event based methods to introduce online offerings of the CWE.

(Note: Since this marketing plan was developed, the CWE has also started a Facebook page and Twitter feed, which will be valuable additions to a marketing plan)
Proposed Marketing Plan for Online Sessions
Submitted June 29, 2011
Janet Dengel and Alison Nolan

I. Web (or email) based

PHASE ONE – Spring

1. Link on CWE home page giving information on how to schedule/procedure for uploading/and tips on what kind of sessions/questions work best online
2. Link and announcement on CWE Facebook page
3. Link from signature line on all staff/consultants’ professional email
4. Write copy for client/staff emails (see Phase Two)

PHASE TWO – Fall

1. Send short email to all current online users with “forward to a friend” request
2. Send short email to all CWE clients inviting them (also w/“forward to a friend”)
3. Email to students leaders/deans/alumni office/career center/library/student clubs and associations
4. Request link from FYW/freshman orientation page/other departments we have a relationship with i.e. alumni page/career center/Center for Pedagogy/library/specialized services
5. CWE Blog entry written by consultants who work online

II. Print based

PHASE ONE – Summer

1. Produce bookmark about CWE with online appointment info – UPDATE: at printer, June 2011
2. CWE newsletter copy – UPDATE: copy submitted to Kris A. in June

PHASE TWO – Fall

1. Write up in Montclarion
2. Bookmark distribution at CWE/class presentations/Montclair Book 2011 events.
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

3. CWE newsletter distribution

III. Event based

PHASE ONE – Summer

1. Hold meeting about strengths/weaknesses about current online platform
2. Update training for online consulting to reflect solutions to any problems

PHASE TWO - Fall

1. Add presentation of online session to class presentations/workshops
2. Produce a virtual class presentation/demonstration about online sessions for selected groups (i.e. hybrid courses, online courses, commuting students)
3. Table in front of library with pamphlets and giveaways (collect email list for future marketing)

PHASE THREE - Spring

1. Hold forum to discuss online consulting with current users and interested users
2. Devise online consulting workshops that may interest users and concentrate on specifics, i.e. brainstorming, writing conclusions, citations and post online (ex: CWE consultant Janet Dengel offers a 25-minute online writing workshop about Writing Conclusions. To sign up for this individual online learning experience, make an appointment with Janet during any open appointment)
To ensure that the research and results of the Perceptions study lived beyond the walls, both physical and virtual, of the CWE presentations were given at:

- **International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) Conference, San Diego, CA, October 25, 2012** (Prezi presentation and Q&A of research results)
- **Graduate Research Network, Computers & Writing Conference 2012, North Carolina State University, May 17, 2012** (oral presentation and roundtable review of research)
- **Montclair State University 2012 Student Research Symposium, Montclair State University, April 22, 2012**
- **Presentation and discussion “Applying to the IRB and the Research Process” for Perceptions of Writing Consultants Towards Online Writing Consultation, February 2011** (classroom presentation for Jessica Restaino’s Research Methods class)
Appendix E
Interview with Dr. Melinda Knight

The history of technology use in writing centers spans decades (see Appendix E), yet when it comes to online synchronous sessions, each center basically finds an individual path that works for its population of consultants and writers. In order to capture the new history of the Center for Writing Excellence’s foray into synchronous online consultation, the follow questions interview was conducted with Dr. Melinda Knight, professor and director of the Center for Writing Excellence:

Interview (July 12, 2012)

Dr. Melinda Knight, Director
Center for Writing Excellence, Montclair State University

Janet: Who initiated the addition of online consulting at the CWE? (i.e. Requests from students, consultants, CWE administrators, university administrators?)

Dr. Knight: The director, program assistant, and consultants decided to do it. Some users also expressed interest.

J: What was the reason behind instituting online consultation at the CWE?

Dr. K: To provide greater access to all users; also, to take advantage of technology.

J: What steps were taken in order to institute the online consulting? (i.e. university approvals, committee study/recommendations, meetings with companies providing modules)

Dr. K: Research by consultants into various options; in the end, we decided to stay with WCOnline

J: How long did this process take? Where there any major delays, disagreements, roadblocks?

Dr. K: Once decided, it took very little time; major roadblocks included clunky system when operational and the fact that not all consultants were interested in doing online sessions; feedback has been mixed, but reasons other than technology are at play (motivation, for example, as a result of the “extra credit” options some faculty members offer, which can result in less engagement from students who simply want to get the credit). Overall, we are pleased.

J: As the director, what benefits did you feel online consulting could provide?
PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE WRITING CONSULTATION

Dr. K: Most important is the increase in access to all writers, who may not be able to come to campus; also, the technology works well for special populations (i.e. writers with disabilities, such as deafness).

J: As the director, what challenges or drawbacks did you anticipate?

Dr. K: Challenges would be consultant resistance, clunky technology, inefficiency, inability to interpret nonverbal communication.

J: To your knowledge did the CWE make use of any other technology during its history of existence?

Dr. K: No.

J: Now that online consulting has been available for approximately 17 months, are you satisfied with the outcome in terms of usage by writers, capability of consultants to work online?

Dr. K: Yes, but we need to try to make it work better if we can. It clearly fits a need and so we want now to make all sessions as productive as face to face. As I mentioned, feedback has been mixed, but not necessarily because of the technology. Besides motivation, the biggest challenge is the length of time it takes to engage in online chat. Some obstacles we may not be able to overcome, so we will see how far we can take the technology we have now. Video would be wonderful, but there are problems in getting it to work effectively.

J: Does online consulting meet the criteria you have set for the mission and goals of the CWE?

Dr. K: Yes. Access is very important for us, as is helping writers grow and develop. Using online technology is clearly important as well.

J: Looking to the future, will the CWE continue to offer online sessions? Will more technology be added? What types of technology do you believe will help writers the most?

Dr. K: Yes. I hope we will be in a position to provide video sessions that work effectively. In addition, I hope that we can expand the ways we can help writers, such as with technology-mediated tools (for example, we will be making speech recognition software available, and there are other options under consideration).
In order to understand how one writing center such as the CWE in New Jersey arrived at the threshold of online synchronous sessions, a full history of technology in writing centers must be included. The contributions of the early "pioneers" of virtual learning and collaborating in writing centers sets an example for all consultants to follow as we try to keep up with technology while making sure it serves the needs of all students.

The following history tells the full story that preceded the CWE journey into online consultation.
The history of today’s online writing consultation in writing centers can be traced through technological platforms, the ‘how and what’ that connect consultants to student writers. Or, this technology can be traced through the stimuli behind the adoption of online writing consultations, the ‘who, when, where, and why.’ This paper will only discuss the history of computers and software as a means to reach and teach writers. As explained by Pemberton (2003), an entire field also exists in relation to digital types of writing, including hypertexts, web pages, embedded documents, and multi-media projects that are visual as well as textual. These nonlinear processes of writing are creating their own history, right now, in the 21st Century, while the “traditional” paper document and its treatment in writing centers have a well-published past.

This chronological history of writing centers’ indelible link to technology use in composition has been documented in several excellent books and journal articles (Coogan, 1999; Hawisher, LeBlanc, Moran, & Selfe, 1996; Huot & Neal, 2006; Palmquist, 2003). In the book Computers and the Teaching of Writing in American Higher Education, 1979-1994: A History, Hawisher et al. (1996) provided an exhaustive account of computers used in composition, both in classrooms and writing centers. A gap is noted in that, “Not fully told are the stories of part-time faculty, or of graduate students,...program administrators, deans, or provosts, many of whom have had important roles in the integration of computers and writing instruction” (p. 11). For the purpose of providing background for the “Perceptions of Consultants toward Online Writing Consultations” research project, the historical framework of technology in
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writing centers will be examined through the eyes, ears, and, fittingly, the fingertips at the keyboards of writing center consultants and administrators. By filling this gap of historical information, this essay will situate writing centers as an important influence on the use of computers in the field of composition.

To achieve this claim, the technological inventions or advancements will be described along with who designed or financed them and, if known, why. These inventions and advancements, which were used to help writers, will be separated into the four categories: instruction, assessment, information, and communication. For each category, the historical facts will be followed by the story of individual writing centers and their journey into the digital world of writing consultation. Lastly, writing center/composition theories that either welcomed these innovations or pushed back against them will be explained. This human side of the story, interwoven with theory, mirrors the Perceptions of Writing Consultants research, which gathers not only quantitative data but also qualitative thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and ideas of writing consultants at Montclair State University’s Center for Writing Excellence (CWE).

**History of Technology in Writing Centers**

Just as cable wires to homes and businesses could be followed along telephone poles for miles or mapped underground across oceans, the groundwork leading up to online sessions at the Montclair State University’s Center for Writing Excellence in 2011 could be actually be traced back more than half a century ago. It would be a fallacy to think that a writing consultant sitting before a computer screen discussing a paper with a freshman sitting in her campus dorm adds up to nothing more than a virtual, rather than in person, way to reach student writers. The history of online writing consultations did
not form in a vacuum. Even the premiere issue of the Writing Lab Newsletter mentioned a computer program developed by Westinghouse for nonstandard English students (Epes, 1977, n.p.). Epes (1977) of York College CUNY, Jamaica, Queens, requested information, feedback, and results on the program from other writing centers in the new journal, creating an early forum to discuss, evaluate, and critique computer programs in writing composition with colleagues. Beyond the people who worked with writers each day, the influence on the roles of computers in composition included the sometimes heavy hand of government, corporations, and private foundations all attempting to guide technology's immersion onto college campuses. While writing centers focused through the years on the process/product concerns of composition theorists (Rohman & Wlecke, 1964; Emig, 1971; Sommers, 1980), there were many more P's which affect the daily life of an online consultant today, including U.S. Presidents to provosts and product promoters to philanthropists.

This technological intrusion, whether backed by good or bad intention, met throughout history with strong opinions. In Electronic Writing Centers: Computing the Field of Composition, Coogan (1999) traced the use of technology in composition studies and writing centers with a promise of progress mixed with wariness, ambivalence, and distrust toward these alternative methods of reaching out to writers (p. 8). In fact, his introduction included this warning: “In order to avoid what I call a Rhetoric of Technocentrism, or an unqualified faith in technological progress, we need to be careful not to link dialogic literacy absolutely with computing” (Coogan, 1999). In other words, the conversations among writers, consultants, texts, instructors, and peers can never be replaced by a “teaching machine” (Coogan, 1999, p. 8). On the other hand, computer use
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in composition has been hailed positively through the years in glowing terms such as "the greatest aid to the active scholar since the printing press" (Mason, 1982, p. 1). Palmquist (2003), author of "A Brief History of Computer Support for Writing Centers and Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Programs," voiced the middle-of-the-information superhighway view, that, "The history of computer support for writing centers...is a repeating pattern of initial enthusiasm, cautious assessment, and qualified success" (p. 395).

Taking a more proactive stance, Hawisher et al. (1996) stated that "changes in technology drive changes in the way we live and work, and we, agents to a degree in control of our own lives, use technology to achieve our human purposes" (p. 1). Keynote speaker Andrea Lunsford challenged attendees at the 2010 International Writing Centers Association (IWCA)-National Conference of Peer Tutoring in Writing (NCPTW) conference to place utmost importance on how writing centers "position ourselves in and respond to virtual spaces as well as physical spaces." Just as the foremothers and forefathers in writing centers not only wrestled with and came to terms with technology, current writing consultants must learn to use continually changing technology to help writers find success in their work. History cautions everyone interested in writing composition to notice not only when technology entered the classroom and writing centers, but who plugged it in and why. Authors Shermis, Burstein, and Leacock (2006) pointed out that "some technologies can be political due to the way they were designed, created, and/or used within a particular community; other technologies are unalterably ideological" (p. 421). This wariness by educators towards computers as teaching tools likely had its beginnings in the source of most technology, the United States government.

Information-Based Technology
In the 1960s and 1970s, a boon occurred in educational funding by corporate, public, university, and private foundation sponsors for computer-assisted instruction (CAI) in many subjects including reading, literacy, and writing for various grade levels. The National Science Foundation (NSF), the U.S. Office of Education, and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) poured millions into CAIs that provided drills, skills, practice, and repetition in various subject areas (Hawisher et al., 1996, pp. 32-36). The computer industry also looked toward education as a new investment frontier, perhaps with the hope of building a future workforce that would fit the country’s burgeoning technological needs. Hawisher et al. (1996) noted the rush to fund the education of a future workforce conjecturing that, “at the same time that Cold War educational initiatives played a key role in the growth of educational technology, service and information were becoming the cornerstones of the American economy” (p. 33). A government report by the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) Science & Technology Institute, publicly released in May 2007, a decade after the Hawisher et al. book, affirmed the impetus for increased spending on computers in education. The report notes that “In 1958, the U.S. Congress enacted the National Defense Education Act (NDEA)…to ensure the security of the Nation through the ‘fullest development of the mental resources and technical skills of its young men and women’” (Ebert Flattau et al., 2006, p. 1). The executive summary confirmed that “The immediate catalyst for the legislation was the Soviet Union’s launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957, which directly challenged the scientific, technological, and military prowess of the United States” (Ebert Flattau et al., 2006, p. 1). In addition to the government push for technology, private and corporate foundations, including Carnegie-Mellon and the Exxon Foundation, joined the march into
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the composition classroom and writing centers (Coogan, 1999, p. 8). Large corporations including IBM, Mitre Corporation, and Control Data Corporation, also opened their coffers, to create CAIs (Coogan, 1999, p. 8). Often, joint projects for CAIs existed among the U.S. government, private foundations, corporations, and universities (Coogan, 1999, p. 8).

One writing center's launch into CAIs captured how quickly this technology grew. Mason (1977) inventoried Michigan Technological University technology equipment, thought to be extensive at the time, by noting, "We handle the multitude seeking help by extensive use of A/V machines. Twelve cassette playback, 20 cassette/filmstrip, and 2 cassette slide units serviced about 3700 individual visits...in fall term 1976" (p. 2). Five years later, Mason (1982) wrote a five-page article in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* about the resurgence of CAIs bolstered by the advent of microcomputers. This new development followed computer-assisted instruction using large computers (1960s and 1970s) and mini-computers (late 1970s). With the cassette players seemingly relegated to the storage room, Mason (1982) praises CAIs’ untapped "interactive capacity" that has potential to "assist the student in becoming an efficient and independent learner" who drives the session (pp. 1-2). Beyond the drill and skill aspects originally touted in the 1960s, instructional modules with an emphasis on problem solving and dialogue were added. Mason (1982) documented the similarity between CAIs and "the best one-on-one instruction: it provides active rather than passive learning; it provides adaptive individual instruction rather than lock-step learning" (p. 2). This adherence to composition theories exemplified how, on a local level, writing centers ensured that CAIs must keep the focus on student-driven, student-established writing goals which respect the unique writing
process rather than just focusing on just the paper and its errors. This also represented an
early push back from writing centers to ensure that computer-assisted instruction would
allow for a collaborative session closest to reflecting the consultant/writer relationship.

Several ingrained writing center theories certainly stretched the limits of CAI
technology. Can you converse, argue, or persuade a computer program? Will each
writer's unique way of composing receive the notice and individual response from a
computer? The theories challenged by the technology include: consultant/writer
collaboration, student-driven learning, and the importance of the writing process rather
than the product (paper). In "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center,"
Andrea Lunsford (1991) enumerated some of the benefits of a collaborative atmosphere
as promoting problem finding and solving, interdisciplinary and critical thinking, active
learning, and analytic skills (p. 49). She called on writing centers to move away from
being storehouses of gathered and disseminated writing information. Instead, Lunsford
(1991) devised the term "The Center as Garret," meaning "viewing knowledge and
reality as mediated by or constructed through language in social use" (p. 48).

The original shift away from students who rely on provided information to ones
who use "them as roads to real discovery of themselves and their subjects" (Rohman &
Wlecke, 1964, p. 219) fittingly had its beginning during the post-Sputnik space race in
1964 through government-sponsored research. The term "prewriting" (also referred to as
invention, discovery, rehearsing, and brainstorming) first surfaced during this time as the
initial phase of the writing process (Rohman & Wlecke, 1964, pp. 216-226). The various
stages of composing, including prewriting, writing, and revision, gradually took
precedence over finding and circling errors. In one important study, Flower and Hayes
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(1980) conducted research that delved into discovery or invention through cognitive understanding (p. 467). While subjects in the study wrote, they verbalized their process, discussing the self-defined problem (assignment) and analyzing audience. Their study found that invention is often not restricted to the beginning of the writing process; rather, it is an ongoing cognitive occurrence as new questions and problems are posed, envisioned, and addressed (Flower & Hayes, 1980, p. 467). No longer making the paper (product) the focus of writing, the ways a writer employed to compose became important, analyzed, even celebrated by writing centers. The processes of prewriting/invention/rehearsing, writing, and revising did not escape the notice of computer software creators. Programs for the invention process included William Wresch's WRITER'S HELPER, Hugh Burns' TOPOI, and Mimi Schwartz' PREWRITE as well as many others (Hawisher et al., 1996, pp. 24-25).

Posey (1990) provided the reaction from a writing center on the capabilities of computers to assist students with the importance of the writing process. In her column entitled “Micro Style” in the Writing Lab Newsletter, she acknowledged, “At the very least, these programs reinforce the idea that there is more than one way to generate ideas for a paper, and, at best, they provide students with additional, often unique, motivation to write” (Posey, 1990, p. 12). She presented software reviews conducted by the Academic Development Center computer writing lab at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), delineating which programs provide “the best match for our theory of the ideal computer-supported writing curriculum— one that introduces computers as a tool to support a writing community” (p. 12). Posey (1990) summarized some of the highlights of the programs; for example, WRITER'S HELPER consisted of a menu with
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brainstorming, questions, and topic options as well as audience analysis, ideas comparisons and connections. To address organization of their paper, students’ prewriting ideas, computer-directed goal setting, outlining, and counterarguments were used to expand and support the initial brainstorming computer session (Posey, 1990, p. 12).

Critics argued that these prewriting prompts could water down a topic, asking generalized questions rather than ones specific to a field of study or particular assignment (Palmquist, 2003, p. 397). Even this complaint was addressed, often campus by campus, using local teaching and technical talent to overcome generalizations. For example, ACAPAK, written and designed at UTEP, used prompts to formulate and create ideas specific to developmental writing classes on campus (Posey, 1990, p. 12). Included in this computer-generated writing process software were definitions of essay components including thesis or central claim and a model essay (Posey, 1990, p. 12). This local journey into computerization supported the idea that writing centers not only reacted to technology, but actually spurred on the use of computers in writing instruction. In the twenty-year-old article, Posey advised centers to follow guidelines for writing programs that will “motivate students to write, write, write, with clear on-screen instructions and easily accessed menus” (p. 13). Further, she implored writing centers to select programs which were written by “educators who themselves teach composition” (p. 13), thus ensuring that the composition theory of process over product would continue to keep the focus on the writer, rather than on the paper. Her ideas and actions, like those of Mason (1982), showed the willingness of writing centers to not only accept and adapt to technology, but to test it and change its course.
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Assessment-Based Technology

Even though these early gains in student-driven computer sessions existed, the strength of computers in analyzing errors remained attractive to anyone working with writers. At the same time that CAIs where on the frontline of writing process praxis, they were also earning their keep in the so-called back office. The forgotten children of the writing process proponents, including copyediting, proofreading, grammar, and style concerns, became an easy target for a computer fix. This last stage of the writing process often received a red pen deletion itself in composition theory because “through the paradigm of the writing process we see this activity as the enemy” (Howisher et al., 1990, p. 30). Yet, in the late 1970s, grammar and style programs such as EPISTLE (IBM, Carnegie-Mellon) and WRITER’S WORKBENCH (Bell Laboratories) reached beyond business into classrooms and writing centers in order to purportedly make the life of professors and students easier. Programs that identified active/passive phrases, run-on and incomplete sentences, and usage errors, or provided spell checking, word counts, and readability levels often saved red ink and reduced frustrations for writers and instructors (Hawisher et al., 1990, pp. 36-37).

Besides being used as reliable tools for attendance and record-keeping, Wresch (as cited in Coogan, 1999, p. 8) related that as early as 1968 computers tabulated student essays which were hand-punched onto sheets, sorting them into weak and strong compositions based on syntax merits. The obvious practical uses of assessing writing, gauging proficiency, and determining placement stood in opposition to the writing center theory of collaboration and dialogue with writers. However, in the 1970s, open enrollment at many public colleges and universities changed the “face” of college
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students, diversifying the population by age, race, ethnicity, and social class. To a large extent, these changes affected the “traditional” readiness in students’ writing skills (Shaughnessy, 1977, pp. 387-396). In the Writing Lab Newsletter Epes (1978) described the COMP-LAB Project funded by a U.S. Department of Education grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) (p. 1). Epes noted,

The population of the COMP-LAB Project consists of students in English 100, the lowest-level remedial course in York’s Freshman English sequence, into which 40% of entering freshmen are placed. These students are largely from minority groups and have high school averages below 80%; their writing characteristically displays heavy dialect interference on the word and sentence level, syntactic confusion, inability to organize ideas on paper, and general ignorance of manuscript form. (p. 2)

Epes, along with Carolyn Kirkpatrick and Michael Southwell, developed the COMP-LAB program, consisting of “audio-visual and self-correcting written exercises,” (Epes, 1978, p. 2). This program backed their philosophy that learning modules should go beyond sentence-level concerns in order to encourage students’ self-recognition of errors, reshaping sentences, and application of the theoretical knowledge and principles learned. Epes (1978) concluded that computer technology cannot teach students paragraph development or analysis which must still be addressed during a writing center session or by the professor through lessons, collaborative class discussion, or writing exercises (p. 2). Epes (1978) confirmed two important points still proclaimed by writing center theory today: “As most instructors are aware, traditional grammar exercises have little to no impact on students’ own writing” (p. 2); and that it is “necessary to establish the habit of
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editing for common errors which do, in fact, characterize their writing, rather than those which most grammar handbooks emphasize” (pp. 2-3).

As experienced by Epes (1978) and written about by Shaughnessy (1977), open enrollment brought about an increase in nontraditional and multilingual student populations. The need to provide inclusiveness and access for all writers and to meet their varied needs strained some of the theories and practices on which writing centers based their philosophies and missions. Applied theories of working from higher-order (organization, context, and clarity) to lower-order (sentence level, grammar, and punctuation) concerns, collaboration and conversation, and student-driven sessions met with confusion from the new users of writing centers and the consultants who tried to help them (Harris, 2008, p. 206). Research conducted by Harris (2008) found that multilingual student writers believe that “the tutor’s task or responsibility is to help students—to point out weaknesses, to correct errors, to answer questions, to help improve their writing, to show students how to make their papers better, and to help them understand what they need to know” (p. 210). These results would paint a session as less dialogic and conversational and more lesson-oriented, favoring the lower-order concerns or fixing mistakes. The consultant would be more active; the student writer would be a more passive listener. In this scenario, a computer could make a good writing consultant. However, Harris (2008) also discovered that the multicultural students she surveyed viewed consultants as approachable advice givers, motivators, and guides to a new learning environment (pp. 212-215). “As tutors, we have to suppress any discomfort with ESL students who seem to want us to tell them how to fix their papers,” cautioned Harris
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(p. 211). She instead called for writing center consultants to adhere to theory while also becoming culturally aware and learning about differences in writing styles (p. 217).

Information-Based Technology

More importantly than the capabilities of computer programs to diagnose “what’s wrong” with multilingual students’ writing, public access to the internet and World Wide Web in the 90s brought hope for many more people to have infinite information at their fingertips. The “Human Development Report 2001: Making New Technologies Work for Human Development” (as cited in Selfe, Hawisher, Lashore & Song, 2009, p. 1500) reported that “two simultaneous shifts—the computer revolution and increasing globalization—have converged to create a new network age, characterized by computer networks that span continents and geopolitical borders.” Although the computer revolution was hailed as a unifying force, Selfe et al. (2009) were quick to note a digital divide, meaning the “disparity between people who have access to and use of computer technologies, computer networks, and the specialized technological education needed to maintain a digital infrastructure and those who do not” (p. 1500). Although a digital divide existed and continues to exist between those who have access to computers and those who do not, writing centers viewed technology as a resource that enabled them to join the information explosion by using the internet to reach diverse writers both locally (within the university) and globally (throughout the world).

The composition idea of local and global concerns provided a metaphor for the progression of writing centers as disseminators of information about writing as centers reached beyond their walls into the world. The more recent journey of technology in writing centers can base its genealogy in OWLs (Online Writing Labs). These
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Informational, and later interactive, platforms propelled virtual access about writing topics starting from a small campus in Indiana and broadening to a worldwide audience.

In 1994, Muriel Harris, then director and founder of the Purdue Writing Lab, along with educational computing graduate student David Taylor, pioneered the first Online Writing Lab (OWL) in the world ("OWL Fact Sheet," n.d.). Known as automated file retrieval systems, the wealth of information amassed and shared from the site constructed a gateway for writers to enter a virtual world where needed knowledge was just a click away (Harris & Pemberton, 1995, p. 145). Since its launch onto the World Wide Web in order to "provide a resource for students who sought writing help but couldn't make it into the physical Writing Lab during operating hours" ("OWL Fact Sheet," n.d.), the Purdue OWL's statistics have attested to this virtual resource's success and popularity. In 2009-2010, the Purdue OWL reported 161 million hits from virtual guests. Users from more than 125 countries (2009-2010) have been linked to over 600 handouts and exercises on writing topics ("OWL site map," n.d.), and tutors have responded to 5,000 emails about writing concerns ("OWL Fact Sheet," n.d.).

These statistics proved a need and thirst for composition/writing studies knowledge including the areas of writing process, academic writing, assignments, mechanics, punctuation, research/citation, teacher and tutor resources, specific subject writing, job search writing, and English as a Second Language ("OWL site map," n.d.). The Purdue OWL site itself stands as a virtual testament to how one writing center can make a huge contribution to not only composition knowledge, but to positive technology integration in writing studies. OWLs grew in popularity and acclaim as they not only connected writers to printable handouts from one source (the local writing center) but
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outside sources as well including other colleges, teachers, journals, and more. As the
technology advanced, hyperlinks, podcasts, and videos (both produced in house and
generated by outside sources) linked students to countless treatises and/or short clips on
topics ranging from punctuation to publishing opportunities. By the late 1990s, Purdue,
along with many other college campus writing centers around the country, began to
realize that, although OWLs could provide nearly limitless amounts of useful information
to student writers, writing center pedagogy emphasized not only information about
writing, but the importance of conversations about writing. Online routes providing
actual conversations about writing needed to be blazed and created.

Communication-Based Technology

The virtual trail, this time a pathway for communicating online, once again can be
followed back to roots in government programs instituted in 1971 by then-President
Richard M. Nixon and the Office of Emergency Preparedness (OEP) (Hawisher et al.,
1996, p. 38). A recession, accompanied by a ninety day wage and price freeze in 1971,
fueled the invention of computer-mediated communication (CMC) through a
government-invented networked conferencing system called EMISARI (Yoshpe et al.,
1972, p. 52). According to a 277-page historical government-published report released in
1972 entitled, “Stemming Inflation: The Office of Emergency Preparedness and the 90-
Day Freeze,” EMISARI, a computerized system (with person-to-person communication
capabilities), was designed for the OEP with technical support from the U.S. Army
Interagency Communications Agency and the Mathematics and Computation Laboratory,
an arm of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Yoshpe et al., 1972, p. 52). This system
consisted of two capabilities: “PartyLine, a synchronous discussion facility analogous to
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telephone conference calls, and Discussion, an electronic blackboard of messages related to specific topics” (Smith & Hoffman-Maginnis, 1992, p. 101). Although exact dates of release to corporations and the public are not noted in sources, these government-devised networks eventually provided the basis for conferencing models used by business, education, and private users (Smith & Hoffman-Maginnis, 1992, p. 101). By the 1980s, this government-initiated technology emerged into composition studies through CMCs which allowed conferencing and networking. BITNET (Because It’s Time), designed in 1981 to connect Yale and CUNY, eventually expanded worldwide in its virtual outreach (Hawisher et al., 1996, p. 38). By the late 1980s, Electronic Networks for Interaction (ENFI) ushered in synchronous and asynchronous virtual classrooms through programs such as INTERCHANGE, COMMENT, and SEEN (Hawisher et al., 1996, p. 32). Sometimes the technology used to establish online/hybrid/distance classrooms and coursework was reflected in writing centers’ inclusion of online consultation. Other times, as one virtual writing space demonstrated, the classroom and the center worked hand-in-hand in the new virtual world.

In 1994, the same year the Purdue OWL first spread its virtual wings, a director of a writing center at a community college in Tennessee teamed up with an associate professor from Arkansas to research, design, and launch the Cyberspace Writing Center Consultation Project (Jordan-Henley & Maid, 1995, pp. 1-6). “It has always seemed to us that all writing takes place in a kind of virtual reality involving one’s vision, one’s ideas, and one’s voice,” the authors contended (p. 1). To accomplish this, Jennifer Jordan-Henley (Roane State Community College - RSCC) and Barry Maid (University of Arkansas Little Rock – UALR) (1995) connected undergraduate students with graduate
or upper-level undergraduates who served as writing consultants. In this project, the participants used email and MediaMOO, a Multi-user dimension Object Oriented text-based synchronous meeting platform based out of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) (p. 2). MOOs established academic and professional cyberspace meeting areas in the late 1990s and were visually attractive to students who already played video games. Students could “enter” a virtual writing center such as the CollegeTownMOO designed at RSCC and UALR with graphics showing a “robot lab assistant...M&M dispenser,...[and] hot-air balloon...geared toward curing writer’s block” (Jordan-Henley & Maid, 1995, p. 4).

Jordan-Henley and Maid (1995) outlined the benefits of the program to students and consultants as: widened access to other cultures; increased agency for students outside of the traditional classroom setting; added research opportunities; improved critical thinking and analysis; and enhanced communication skills and strategies (pp. 2-3). This project exemplified the philosophy of collaboration in writing centers on many levels by connecting students, faculty, writing consultants, and writing center administrators. Writing center technology trailblazers like Harris, Jordan-Henley, and Maid were not alone in the quest for cyberspace settings to open up portals for students writers. Crump (1998) counted 250 links for OWLs on the National Writing Centers Association (NWCA) site in 1998; in 1993, there were “virtually” none (p. 224). Crump’s statement, “Writing Center folks are doing their bit to explore the new terrain, to see what the Internet can do and what implications it has for the future of writing centers” (p. 224) is rather humble, considering the fact that writing centers did so much more than just give it the clichéd “old college try.” Through adherence to established theories and best
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practices, writing consultants and directors, along with composition professors addressed concerns with the writer in mind and defended the need for human interaction to improve writing.

This philosophy of collaboration in writing centers firmly established the importance of dialogic theory (Coogan, 1999, pp. 27-58) at the heart of one-on-one sessions. Reading texts, making meaning, discussing those meanings, and writing essays based on those exchanges, relies on conversation. In the chapter “Email ‘Tutoring’ and Dialogic Literacy,” Coogan (1999), from the Illinois Institute of Technology, evaluated email conversations as a way to dialogue with students about meaning. He wrote,

"Students...are not organisms with faulty language behaviors. They are human beings with the will power and the desire to make meaning. When a human being finds expression difficult, he or she does not need a series of grammar drills but a conversation with another human being. (p. 28)"

The technology of the 1990s and the new millennium, including MOOs, email, and synchronous online chats, moved the face-to-face visit to virtual places, making the new challenge facing writing centers one of establishing human relationships in a new realm.

The ongoing concerns voiced about collaboration in writing centers echoed into cyberspace. Minimalist or pure tutoring practices renewed the call for student ownership and agency (Brooks, 1991, p. 168). Some minimalist practices include having the student set goals, make corrections, and write during the session. Consultants focus on asking questions to encourage thinking while pointing out a writer’s common mechanical errors, rather than performing line-by-line edits (Brooks, 1991, pp. 169-172). These practices often clash with more directive approaches such as modeling transition sentences,
suggesting word substitutions, or noting specific areas that need revision or rewriting (Shamoon & Burns, 1995, pp. 173-175). An eclectic approach, as outlined by Hewitt (2010), was based on individual needs of each student writer and each of his or her visits; thereby blending these opposing theories into a philosophy of “us[ing] any and all effective strategies from any and all epistemologies” (p. 79). In the new millennium to the present, writing centers, often one by one as they add synchronous online consulting to their offerings, have reconsidered composition theory. In the most recent definitive sourcebook titled, The Online Writing Conference: A Guide for Teachers and Tutors, Hewitt (2010) acknowledged the importance of composition theories and movements including: rhetorical (audience/argument driven), current-traditional (problem/error/corrective driven), cognitive (how writers think), process (the steps writers take to arrive at a product), expressivism (personal expression and growth), and social constructionist (collaborative, community discourse driven writing) (p.79). Hewitt (2010) took a bold stance that again challenged the writing center philosophy of minimalist-tutor intervention, student-owned sessions:

It is unfortunate that the act of teaching itself—of intervening into a student’s writing—may be interpreted as a negative, unkind, or appropriative act rather than a natural part of the conference process. I call instead for an epistemological approach that embraces accuracy, brevity, and instructional ethos, and that recognizes the potential for fidelity between words and meaning in an online interaction. (pp. 79-80)

Hewitt’s “call” repositioned the consultant not as a peer or equal discussing writing, but as an instructor with a “teacherly voice” (p. 80). She stated that this more directive,
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Authoritative approach online does not diminish the student's ownership or change the writer's ideas, but that an online session must be "strategic" and "straightforward" because of its textual nature (p. 80). Online, the "voice" of the consultant is written; it becomes a document of instruction, more than conversation. Hewitt (2010) advocated a "systematic and problem-centered" focus that still addresses higher-order concerns such as content development, genre, and process, but not in a "scattershot manner" (p. 80).

Could it be that computers in writing centers have refocused theory back to the product, not the writer? In the landmark article, "The Idea of a Writing Center," North (1984) firmly insisted that "in a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction" (p. 38). His battle cry has continually been quoted and revisited as students, technology, and composition pedagogy have changed over the decades. Perhaps the paper was equally important to the writer and her/his process all along. Maybe the term "fix-it shop," although derogatory, did describe one aspect of a writing consultant's ability to teach, instruct, and help the writer fix a paper so his or her meaning is clear. Either way, most writing center consultants and administrators still agree that some dynamics change once a computer makes the one-on-one writing session a threesome. As Harris, along with co-author, Pemberton (1995) from the University of Illinois, noted:

Attempting to only replicate familiar face-to-face tutorial settings in an electronic, text-oriented environment can lead to frustration...Instead, it is important to recognize that OWLs can have a number of very different configurations—configurations that take advantage of the strengths of online environments and work with, not against, both local conditions and writing center theory. (p. 145)
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Summary

In fifty plus years, computers have not yet taken over writing centers and permanently replaced the real bowl of candy with the virtual M&Ms mentioned by Jordan-Henley and Maid (1995). The software capabilities that enabled computer “program authors [to] insert effective TLC [tender, loving care] at the appropriate places in the appropriate amounts” (Mason, 1982, p. 2) have not replaced human contact. Epes (1978) wrote with enthusiasm about the COMP-LAB project at CUNY, but did not fail to mention the writing center as a “friendly, quiet place, staffed by knowledgeable, helpful non-threatening tutors” (p. 2). In the book, Hamlet’s BlackBerry: A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age, Powers (2010) acknowledged that “People are constantly trying to close the distances between them by inventing new connective tools and working over time to improve them” (p. 87). He hypothesizes that even Socrates and Plato, some 2400 years ago when written language had arrived in Greece as a new communication tool, felt the need to “[explore] human connectedness in a time of dramatic technological change” (Powers, 2010, p. 83).

Alternative learning methods used in a digital world have inarguably influenced writing theory and praxis; however, composition/writing center theories, in turn, have reshaped digital pedagogy. Writing center consultants’ and administrators’ acceptance, rejection, or (to borrow a term from composition theory) revision of the technology’s original aim, have made invaluable contributions. Much of the online consulting experience is based on every day practices and a how-to, step-by-step approach; however, more importantly, to be successful in helping writers grow in independence, confidence, and ability, online practices must be developed with firm roots in writing center
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philosophy. The question remains: How do writing centers respond to technology in a way that stays true to their philosophies, missions, goals, pedagogy, and praxis? For those on the frontlines, what is at stake seems to remain the same. The context of what writers have to say matters to writing consultants.

History has shown that the institutions that encourage and enable writers to express themselves, be it academics, society, government, corporations, or foundations, reveal a great deal. The tools employed to communicate messages and who has access to these tools, make a difference in what people express, who hears them, and who responds. Rather than research the history of pens, typewriters, and publishing (in print and online), this observation was also based on my experience both as a student and a professional. In the early 1970s, I was told that to publish I must get a job or an agent. In 2011, I post to a blog, have published in an online journal, and belong to discussion groups. Writers in the 1960s may have only needed access to a pen and paper, or perhaps a manual or electric typewriter. Their hurdle, like mine, arose in facing a powerful publishing industry’s rules and guidelines, along with consumer/advertising driven preferences. These power structures created a barrier to writers sharing their ideas. Now publishing is more accessible with online blogs, web sites, forums, and social media providing virtual platforms through which anyone can pontificate. Yet, Selfe and Hawisher (2006) remind educators that,

...we cannot hope to understand any literacy until we understand the complex social and cultural systems—both local and global—within which literacy practices and values are situated...and we cannot represent digital literacy solely
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through statistics that provide the numbers of computers in different countries. (p. 1518)

The hurdles today are the boundaries and limits erected by technology itself. The divides between who gains access to computers, software, and the Internet and who does not gain access determines who is allowed to have a voice. Hopefully, writing centers will continue to stand out in the forefront to make sure that the “who” is everyone.