

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

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Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing

October, 2000

...FROM THE EDITOR...

For those who are exploring online tutoring, are considering it, or are actively engaged in it, you'll find interesting reading in this issue which focuses heavily on our role in online tutoring as well as on technology in our labs. Justin Jackson's analysis of what online tutoring can and should offer is an interesting counterbalance to what Holly Moe found when studying a commercial online tutoring service.

With Holly Moe's article, we are initiating what we hope will be an occasional feature in the newsletter, a "web study." While Irene Lurkis Clark and Karen Rowan offer us a book review, Holly Moe provides us with her review/study of a website and what it offers. This suggests that just as we look critically at what print media offer us, we can also do the same with other media such as websites—those sources that are becoming ever more dominant in our students' lives.

Returning to a more basic question, Indigo Fleming-Powers reflects on the benefits of tutoring for tutors. Her answers should help other tutors realize what they have gained and—when they begin preparing their résumés—what skills they can list there.

• Muriel Harris, editor

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Interfacing the faceless: Maximizing the advantages of online tutoring

As writing labs continue to branch out into cyberspace, questions abound as to the potential changing role of the writing lab, especially in its capacity online. Should the OWL (Online Writing Lab) act as a resource medium, providing users with a variety of writer-related tools (including handouts, interactive workshops, exercises, and additional links to more resources)? Or can it be a medium in which one conducts tutorials as well? While the answer to the first question has been answered with a resounding "yes," the second question evokes a much quieter, more reserved response. An OWL that provides handouts, exercises, etc. simply replaces a grammar handbook, a rhetorical guideline to the writing process, or various workbooks; it is nothing more than an extension of the tools writers already have at their disposal; the OWL conveniently makes these resources accessible online. But the second question, and "the tools" it seemingly replaces, threatens the very nature of the writing lab: the face-to-face (f2f) tutorial cannot be processed through fiber-optics, for both the writer

and the tutor are real individuals, with real writing needs; it is an on-going dialogue that needs eye contact, body language, direct and indirect questioning, and the writer's response. At its foundation, the tutorial is writer-centered, and the tutor's job is to facilitate the writer's discovery of his or her writing self. But online, where is the tutor? Perhaps more importantly, where is the writer? The most frightening prospect of the online tutorial is that all one is left with is the writing and not the writer, the product and not the process.

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Editor: Muriel Harris

Managing Editor: Mary Jo Turley
English Dept., Purdue University, 1356
Heavilon, West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356
(765)494-7268.

e-mail: harrism@cc.purdue.edu
mjturley@purdue.edu

web site:<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/lab/newsletter/index.html>

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My concern here is with the ways in which the online tutorial, though through a seemingly antithetical medium for its purpose, can in fact appropriate many of the same gestures f2f tutorials employ when engaging writers. I am not arguing that online tutorials can ever replace f2f tutorials; they cannot, and it would be dangerously naive to believe so. In fact, when Purdue students engage us online, we try our hardest to convince them to come into the Writing Lab to talk with us. Online tutorials, however, offer tutors unique opportunities when they engage the writer and vice versa; it is up to the tutor to minimize the inherent disadvantages of the online tutorial while maximizing its distinct advantages. Much like the f2f tutorial, each tutor must identify his or her strengths as an online tutor, understand the limits and opportunities of the online "dialogue," and, perhaps most importantly, develop an online "voice." Although I have had the opportunity to work with MOO on several occasions, I do not have any practical experience tutoring writers via this medium; I could only theorize as to its advantages and disadvantages, predict the way in which one-to-one pedagogy may work in a MOO. Therefore, I will only concentrate on the medium I have been working with for the past thirteen months (as both tutor and coordinator of online tutorials at Purdue University's OWL): tutoring via email. My focus will be three-pronged: 1) to demonstrate the ways in which traditional one-to-one teaching pedagogy can be utilized online; 2) more specifically, to demonstrate the ways in which writer-centered self questioning (and its inherency in this online process), tutor-based questioning, and the use of information-based direction (via hyperlinks) can be employed to give the online tutorial a unique flavor not experienced in a face-to-face setting; and 3) to demonstrate how when one remains conscious of these first two aspects, and vigilant in their application, can online tutorials avoid the unpleasant fate of becoming a "glamorized grammar hotline."

Before discussing online tutoring, I offer the following background information as to how we coordinate online tutorials at Purdue University's OWL. There are five graduate tutors who currently work online, and all also engage in f2f tutorials in the Writing Lab as well. Each tutor is assigned to a particular day of the week when he or she responds to any writing-related inquiries. Because of obvious time constraints, each tutor works online only one hour per week. I find it helpful to ask each tutor to respond on his or her given day for only about forty to forty-five minutes; this allows up to twenty minutes for additional response if a writer has follow-up questions/concerns (which is often the case). Most of our tutors put in more than one hour per week, and are happy to do so, when engaged with a writer in an ongoing dialogue. We are very fortunate at Purdue to be able to also have an "hourly" tutor (i.e., a tutor who works for an hourly rate outside of the Lab) to "clean up" any of the day's unanswered requests (and to attend to weekend inquiries), as we try to respond to all requests within twenty-four hours; our "hourly" tutor is one of our regular online tutors who agrees to these extra duties. Being the coordinator, along with having my own online tutoring day, it is also my responsibility to answer any question that the other tutors cannot (usually administrative questions), and to help in the "clean up" process. The most important aspect is for all of us to communicate with one another (usually via email), letting a tutor know if he or she has a follow-up response to an initial inquiry. We also ask each other to respond to an email if the question is in a tutor's particular area of study/specialization. This unique characteristic of the online tutorial has become one of our most valued commodities, especially considering the variety and range of questions we receive—from how one should go about constructing a research grant proposal to how one can distinguish between countable and uncountable nouns. The writer benefits from this format because the special-

ized tutor can ask appropriate questions, offer helpful insights, or recommend various source materials (writers find this last one extremely valuable). Though our online tutorials still act as a supplement to our Writing Lab and even to our OWL, the online tutorial is becoming a more oft-used service by a variety of writers, from a variety of countries, with a variety of needs. Undeniably, the more online tutorials proliferate, the more administrative concerns will need to be addressed; subsequently, this will entail more pedagogical dialoging that I hope my essay addresses.

In 1995, Muriel Harris posited that, “as the Internet grows and develops, on-line writing centers will take on new shapes and provide learning environments for writers in ways we cannot yet predict” (4). And as these new learning environments morph, they simultaneously transform the tutoring environment, challenging instructors to “do what we do” in this new setting. Do we ignore the new tutoring opportunities afforded us by this new medium in order to preserve every aspect of traditional one-to-one pedagogy, the very foundation of which is the f2f experience? Or does our application of one-to-one pedagogy really even risk becoming non-extant, ineffectual within this new medium—a paranoid invention of techno-phobes? Ultimately, one must not work within the confines of this dichotomy?¹ One’s approach to tutoring online will undoubtedly have to undergo some changes, but virtually everything one is taught about effective f2f peer tutoring lies at the core of successful online interaction between tutor and writer: make sure the writer takes ownership of his or her own work, always ask questions, and allow the writer to make the necessary corrections.

Having had been exclusively a f2f tutor for six years prior to going online, I was slightly hesitant about the new medium. I was uneasy about the absence of a face across from me. I was worried that the writer who seeks

help online loses the most important aspect of the tutoring process: confirming/preserving his or her own *writer-ness*. The only thing in the online experience, I thought, is the writing on the screen, the product minus the producer. I quickly found this to be untrue. For example, every tutor is familiar with the “I’m just not a good writer” confession. Online, however, this “confession” takes a new shape, and it provides the writer, this seemingly absent participant, a medium in which to unabashedly vent writing frustrations. In many cases, this faceless individual shares writing woes in a short paragraph or two, indicating what frustrates her the most, what troubles she has had consistently throughout the years (and this gives the online tutor invaluable insight and a great place to start). For the writer, this “confession” acts as a pseudo-apology, and (though the writer usually isn’t aware) it acts as a first stage of the self-reflection process (more importantly, this takes place through writing). Even more paradoxically, it seems to be the very absence of the tutor’s face, and the online “screen” of anonymity for writers, that allows the cathartic ability to say whatever they wish—about writing in general or about themselves specifically as writers.

This inherent self-critiquing process of the online tutorial, beginning as early as the “confession” stage, eventually will empower the writer if the tutor can harness this obvious advantage of the medium. In fact, what I believed to be a “faceless” medium turned out to be anything but “faceless.” From the beginning, it was a miscalculation of the place of the face. The online tutorial can in fact become a f2f tutorial—the writer facing herself through her own writing. The online tutorial, because of the medium itself, cannot help but aid the online tutor in helping the writer critique her own writing, facilitating the first step for the writer-centered tutorial: “to develop their critical powers in order to appraise their work as they progress. Without this ability to draw back from what has been writ-

ten—to question its content, consider alternatives, or wonder what’s missing—writers are less apt to revise in any meaningful way” (Harris, *Teaching One-to-One* 22). The critical powers are already put in motion, however, before the online tutorial begins. Because the tutor has no face, because we are dealing in an asynchronous medium (as opposed to a synchronous f2f tutorial), because we cannot ask a series of questions to garner a response, writers often appraise their work before the tutorial, realizing that their guidance will be needed in the process, and that the more specific they are with their concerns, the more specific the tutor can be with responses/follow-up questions (and if writers are not aware of this, it is the tutor’s job to make them conscious of this aspect of the medium). The online tutor will often find very general self-evaluation from the writer in a specific area within the writing process—“I can’t get started,” “I don’t know how to use commas,” “I don’t know if my introduction is clear enough.” There is undeniably a greater onus of writer-centered responsibility online; the “faceless” tutor online does not sit across the table with a friendly smile, nor can the writer await the questioning process that has proved so successful in the past. Without writer-prompted questions, the online tutor cannot tailor a response to suit the writer’s needs and must make sure the online writer is aware of this; it is perhaps one of the most crucial aspects of “building rapport” online.

The above theoretical frame is perhaps misleading to those who have yet to experience an online tutorial. Writers do not always come prepared with specific questions—or any questions at all. As in the f2f tutorial, writers oftentimes come into the online tutorial seeking an editor not a tutor, or are simply unaware as to what it is we do. Like the f2f tutorial, the online tutor’s job is to explain our role as tutor, what we hope to accomplish, and what it will take from the writer in order to accomplish this (namely, specific questions or some sort of guidance from the

writer—"help us to help you"). I have often been confronted with: "To whom it may concern, here's my essay. Can you correct whatever needs to be corrected. I need this by Wednesday. Thank you." We have created a number of files (boilerplates) that respond to oft-repeated requests: basic MLA and APA documentation information (and some common specific citation requests as well), for example. If we receive "proofreading" requests, we call up the file "policies," which fully explains to the writer what it is we do. We may then tailor a couple of general questions to give writers an idea as to what they can do to help us help them. We then, of course, always invite writers back once they have figured out a specific question or two. Ultimately this accomplishes two very important things for the writer (and for the tutor): 1) it allows writers to decide if this is a service they would like to use; 2) if the answer to the first question is "yes," then it initiates a writer's evaluative process. Writers must begin to pinpoint their specific areas of concern, then design questions to aid our comprehension of these concerns.

This inherent self-reflective quality of the online tutorial has been often recognized, though sometimes with quite a bit of reservation and skepticism: "More theoretically, some writing center folks point out that an OWL locates learning about writing 'in' writing—as writers online must gloss their own text with questions and commentary for the tutor, and then must interpret the tutor's written response" (Spooner 6). From my experience, the online tutor will have little trouble at all finding the practical use within this "theoretical" aspect. Writers often become startled when they realize they can discuss themselves in the third person, that their writing is something they not only produce but can critique (a crucial step in claiming ownership)—and via online the writer *must* critique. The simultaneity of the writer's writer-reader-writer mode begins almost as immediately as the tutor

asks the first question. To counter the seemingly Pollyanna theoretical assumptions presented here, Spooner goes on to question the practicality of the online tutorial, noting that a lack of participation from the student may kill the whole process. As the online tutor develops his or her online questioning/writing skills (and this takes some time for even the most experienced f2f tutor), a lack of writer participation will begin to decrease rapidly; in fact, student-writers can become so comfortable with the online medium in general that they rarely hesitate to ask follow-up questions (even in the form of thank you notes). As more and more people use the internet, the comfort level increases, barriers of communication resistance break down, and this of course will trickle down into the online tutorial (as will some of the negative aspects of "point-and-click" consumerism, which I will address later).

At the heart of this discussion is the inter-relatedness of the questioning process and the writer-centered tutorial (both f2f and online), and this is certainly nothing new to one-to-one pedagogy. Spooner asserts that while creating a "student-centered, non-directive, response oriented" dynamic is difficult enough in a f2f setting, it becomes "impossible" to do so via an online medium "for all but the most accomplished of tutors" (7). Spooner is perhaps being too dismissive here. For some reason, it seems that the onus has shifted from the writer in this writer-centered pedagogy to the tutor. What if the tutor becomes a present absence (there but not there)? This seems to be one of the tenuous roles of the tutor—to establish one's presence online, to establish a "voice," but to avoid becoming the faceless Superman with all of the answers. We want our presence known without really establishing our presence; we want writers to discover their *writerness* not because of us but because of the questions they ask, because of the guidance they give us. The uniqueness of this situation, this present absence, is not a liability; it can

very much be an advantage to the writer, as the online medium establishes the necessity for writer-centered responsibility, a responsibility that must be delicately fostered by the online tutor.

Perhaps fittingly, much of this is accomplished by utilizing the same one-to-one pedagogy as the f2f tutorial. Over the past year, I witnessed an online tutor struggle to first try to find his "face" online, to establish his presence; then, once he discovered that the existence of his "face" could possibly mean a de-centering of the writer-centered tutorial, I watched him quickly try to annihilate his "face," replacing it with an online "voice," which shifts the focus back on the writer and away from the tutor. The transformation happened almost overnight. When Geoff began tutoring online in the fall, he was not doing f2f tutorials concurrently. He and I talked about online tutoring pedagogy, but it was slightly difficult, as I was attempting to bridge the online and the f2f medium utilizing similar pedagogy. Geoff, however, had not experienced either. When he began tutoring online, he seemed to establish his "face" in a very pointed way: by answering questions directly, by providing straightforward responses to the questions being asked. The process became tutor-centered for Geoff—how else was he supposed to do his job? In the spring, however, a tutoring position opened up in the Lab, and Geoff was invited to join the staff. Almost instantly, as soon as he began doing f2f tutorials, as soon as he saw the importance of de-centering himself as tutor and establishing a writer-centered dynamic (through both direct and non-direct questioning), Geoff's online voice emerged and silenced his presence. No longer were his responses direct answers; rather, he found online writers responding more positively to his "Socratic" questioning. More intriguing was how his online "voice" developed so quickly. His online voice became very engaging, and writer follow-up questions increased dramati-

cally (as did the thank you notes). Geoff has noted that his focus shifted from the writing to the writer, but that the only way to do this was to let the writer do most of the work. He needed only to ask the questions to which, as a reader, he wanted answers. Geoff came to realize that when he answered questions directly (even the vaguest of questions), he was focusing on the writing; when he asked questions, however, the focus shifted back to the writer (hence the proliferation of follow-up questions from writers).

What is writer-centered tutoring if not question-based? In fact, when the writer asks the online tutor a question, the tutor needs to read the question in its proper context: that is, this is not a question posed to me but a question that the writer has posed to herself using me as a mirror. The inter-facing here is between the writer and herself, hence my role as a present absence. This characteristic of the questioning process must be kept in mind at all times if the tutor is to stay focused on the writer and not the writing. Jan C. Thompson has aptly labeled this writer-centered questioning process *metacognition*: “ways of thinking about their own thought and communication processes,” which will act as “a foundation for more successful and independent thinking and communicating in the future” (2). In fact, many of the self-questioning ideals Thompson highlights in the f2f tutorial are indeed inherent within the online tutoring experience. For example, she writes, “If helping students become more independent writers is one of our goals, and if questioning is a metacognitive strategy that can foster their independence, then it seems reasonable to have as another central goal that students learn to formulate their own questions” (3). The online tutorial can never not be doing this. The writer, as I have noted before, must help the tutor help him or her. Furthermore, writers must formulate these questions about their writing through writing.

Oftentimes, writers, in communicating their concerns/questions answer their own concerns/questions. One of the most exciting moments for the online tutor is when a writer answers his or her own question. For example, we’ve had writers send their introductory paragraph(s) and express concern over the absence of a thesis: “Here’s my introduction, but I can’t think of a good thesis that sums up my argument.” The tutor may respond, “What do you think your argument is?” The writer at that moment, whether aware of it or not, must construct a thesis in order to respond to the initial question (and a series of further questions can stem from this). The writer often replies, “O.K., here’s my argument . . .” Many times, by the end of the statement, the writer will ask, “will this line work as my thesis?” And it usually does. Sometimes, the writer still doesn’t discover that he has constructed a thesis, so the tutor simply has to ask, “what’s wrong with the sentence you provided me? Does it state your main claim?” Unlike the f2f tutorial where there is the oral-aural relationship between tutor and writer, online provides only one medium—writing. How many times has the f2f tutor experienced this same thing in verbal communication, only to find the writer asking, “what did I say again” or “I just can’t write what I say” when the tutor points out that the writer just uttered a perfectly usable thesis. I have found that writer-centered metacognition is one of the greatest advantages of the online medium, and to maximize its potential, I formed my approach to online tutoring around this core.

It should be noted, however, that the questions one asks online have to be carefully formulated, which obviously takes practice. Too vague a question at the wrong time may frighten writers away; too direct of a response at the wrong time may place too much focus on the writing. This of course leads to the ever-popular dichotomy of directive versus non-directive tutoring.

Oftentimes the writer will ask a two-pronged question, though the writer may see it as simply one question. The question may be both about the writing in front of the tutor, but it may also be an information-based question. These types of inquiries are very common for the online tutor, and can be very tricky to answer—tricky not in the sense that they are difficult but in the balancing act the tutor must perform between directive and non-directive response. Sometimes, as Harris notes, a directive approach—“telling”—can be far more productive in the tutorial than leading the writer through questioning (*One-to-One* 69). But what if the writer’s request weaves a question-based concern within an information-based need?

Many ESL questions fit this two-pronged variety. There are a number of metacognitive questions the tutor can ask, but there is also an abundance of information-based material the writer may need. Here again, the online medium affords the tutor a unique opportunity. We often receive very specific requests from ESL writers, usually concerned with grammatical/syntactical issues. Very often, the ESL writer will provide the tutor with a number of sentences, inquiring as to which one is “correct.” This of course can become difficult to explain when more than one of the constructions is indeed “correct.” For example, the writer may indicate that there is a “tense problem” in the sentences provided: “Dear Teachers, which one of the sentences is correct? 1) I have gone to the store. 2) I had gone to the store. 3) I will have gone to the store. Thank you.” One may begin by shifting the focus back on the writer by asking, “What do you think the differences are? It will be helpful for me to understand how you see the tense differences? Can you explain them to me?” One may then wish to follow up this questioning phase with some information-based direction. This becomes extremely interactive online, as the tutor can provide hyperlinks in his or her response.

Purdue's OWL has over one hundred and thirty handouts that act as our foundation for information-based responses. In the above example, I would provide a couple of hyperlinks that deal explicitly with tense. I would then ask the writer some more questions regarding the information I provided and try to get him to make some connections between the information, his request, and my initial questions. What becomes even more advantageous is that all of this takes place on pop-up screens on the computer. Here, the writer can look at his sentences, my questions, and the information provided all on one screen, all simultaneously. Writers appreciate the mixture of information-based direction and questioning. It allows the tutor to "intrude" with the information and then step out of the picture again when he or she asks pertinent questions, leaving writers to face their own writing. This also makes it much easier to explain the concept that there may not be one "correct" answer for every question. When writers are engaged in the two-pronged process, they are provided with the information that demonstrates the occasional difficulty of finding one "correct" answer along with the questions that lead to this discovery. Here's a writer's reply to my questions regarding the "correct" use of "skin" or "skins" in a local paper:

To your question "What's the difference?" my answer is simply, I felt comfortable with my opinion. It didn't occur to me to think in terms of how my cousin could be right. I thank you for asking that question. Having described my thinking, perhaps the question tells me more than what it literally asks. The idea that the printed message could be correct and conveying a slightly different meaning never entered my mind. The next time I encounter a similar problem, the slight difference in wording should call forth the red flag you have given me. Again many thanks.

This is a common response to much of our information-based questioning. It allows the writer to engage himself in not only a thinking process but to see the applications to the writing process as well.

A lot of the success of the online tutorial is founded upon the idea of this metacognitive process, writer-centered self-questioning, facilitated of course by the online tutor. But what if the tutor's questions go unanswered? That is to say, what if we receive no follow-up feedback from the writer. Unfortunately, this scenario is not that uncommon. But it's not nearly as dim a picture as Spooner suggests: "Further, it's my bet that typical online writing conferences will amount to only one round of turn-taking: the student sends a text with a question, and the tutor replies; exit" (7). Eric Crump has already responded to Spooner's assumption and concedes Spooner's "one round" assumption to be true. Crump, however, maintains that this may be attributed to "lack of familiarity with the technology and its culture," and that "it's certainly not a product of technology itself" (7). Since the Spooner-Crump debate in 1994, internet technology, access, and familiarity has grown exponentially. Perhaps this is why at Purdue's OWL we have seen the number of "one-round" tutorials decrease. Perhaps our online tutors deserve much of the credit. Over the past year, as our online tutorials became more organized, as our online tutors began addressing real pedagogical concerns, as we each began looking at each other's responses (all responses are saved in a folder), "one-round" tutorials decreased drastically, while "multi-round" dialogues have increased. We have become more comfortable with our roles as online tutors, have accepted these roles, and have begun to take advantage of the opportunities the online medium provides. Furthermore, why does the "one-round" have to stop with the student? Does the tutor simply sit in silence for the whole 22-minute tutorial if the writer does not respond? Or does

the tutor seek clarification? I have, on occasion, posted follow-up questions to writers who have asked very engaging and complicated questions. I did not wait for a response to my questions from the writer. For the most part, what I found is that writers very much appreciated our help but simply did not respond. These "one-rounders" tend to be student-writers who are used to asking questions, getting a response, job accomplished. Our questions "answered" their questions, leaving them quite comfortable with where they were in the writing process. They are quite simply not used to having someone interested in feedback, especially online. Usually, when student-writers have a follow-up question, it is my experience that they do not hesitate to ask (sometimes responding up to three times in a day to our various questions). Writers in the business world, however, rarely fail to respond to our initial questions/response, even if it is a simple "thank you." As internet use grows, writers will become more comfortable with posing multi-rounded questions; it is the tutor's job to facilitate this process. Often, a simple invitation can aid in creating a dialoging atmosphere: for example, "I hope these questions help. If you have any more questions/concerns, please do not hesitate to email us." And when writers are faced with a genuine question/concern, they rarely balk at the opportunity.

I hope this discussion helps alleviate worries that online tutorials may only act as a glamorized grammar hotline. There is no doubt that there are many pitfalls facing the online tutor; she must be aware that anything that is written as an "example" may be usurped by the writer; even "helpful language" provided by the tutor may be inserted into the text "uncritically" by the writer (Spooner 8). These are aspects of the medium the online tutor needs to remain extremely conscious of. But if the online tutor holds tightly to the foundations of one-to-one pedagogy, many of these pitfalls can be avoided. Ask questions, give informa-

tion-based direction, but avoid taking over the role of the writer. For example, I find that a helpful way to answer grammatical/syntactical questions/concerns is by constructing my response in the very form of the sentence construction in question, and calling the writer's attention to this. Depending on staff size, time that can be invested to individual online inquiries, and various pedagogical concerns, each OWL's online tutorial will have to define its own parameters when it comes to responding to texts. I am very hesitant, for example, about replying to complete drafts of long papers (long being defined as four or more pages), though specific concerns regarding overall organization can be addressed. The questioning process alone for a longer paper can become quite a burden for both the tutor and the writer. It can very easily become a guessing game—each individual's guessing the other's expectations. Perhaps this is where a synchronous online medium such as a MOO could be helpful. At Purdue, we encourage shorter excerpts and specific writer-generated questions regarding the excerpts. This allows us to ask questions that writers can tackle in a single sitting. We of course invite writers back to ask more questions regarding the paper. Even in a f2f medium, however, rarely do I find myself necessarily reading through a whole paper in order to help the writer (especially in a thirty-minute session). In fact, having the writer point out specific areas of concern is a major stepping stone in the f2f tutorial, allowing the writer to take ownership of the paper. Essentially, this is all the online tutor asks: show me where you need help, help me to understand what concerns you may have so that I may ask you pertinent questions or provide you with some information-based direction. Perhaps overly simplistic, but I tell our online tutors at Purdue: if you don't want to be a grammar hotline, then don't be one. In effect, what I'm recognizing is that online tutors and writers will engage in a pattern of communication, a process of negotiation. It is our

job to interface writers by providing them with their own faces, which means establishing our present absence. Our facelessness may be our greatest asset.

Of course, it may also be one of our greatest dangers. As the internet expands, and users become very comfortable with it as a medium, a place where one can find information, buy a computer, sell a home, get a college degree, we also have to be mindful of the ramifications of our facelessness: we have the potential to become just another tool to be used and consumed. Because of the nature of "point-and-click consumerism," internet users often forget the face on the other side of the screen. As a tutor one must constantly be aware of the face on the other end; at the same time, a tutor must somehow remind the writer that the tutor also has a face, without ever really asserting that face. It is a balancing act indeed, but one that has already been taken up, and will continue to be addressed, by writing labs across the globe in the very near future. The writer-centered tutorial has nothing to fear in cyberspace; in fact, the transition to this new medium may serve as a helpful reminder to all tutors that the face to be preserved/confirmed is the writer's—his process, not his product. Paradoxically, it may just be the absence of a face that facilitates this process.

J.A. Jackson
Purdue University
West Lafayette, IN.

¹ This dichotomy has been often described as "instrumental theory of technology" versus "substantive theory of technology." According to Stuart Blythe, "An instrumental approach in writing center literature might suggest that on-line work and interaction isn't fundamentally different from face-to-face interaction. Such an approach might lead one to question how students and tutors are using technology, rather than ques-

tioning how the technology itself changes interaction. . . . A substantive approach in writing center literature might suggest that the design of a particular piece of technology fundamentally changes the nature of student/tutor interaction."

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Book Review

Taking Flight with OWLS: Research into Technology Use in Writing Centers. Ed. James Inman and Donna Sewell. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000. (240 pp.; \$49.95)

Reviewed by Irene Lurkis Clark (California State University—Northridge, Northridge, CA)

My assistant and I waited eagerly for my copy of *Taking Flight with OWLS*, edited by James A. Inman and Donna N. Sewell, because we were anxious to learn how other writing center directors were using OWLS and concerned that ours was not working the way it ought to be. Now that we have both read the book, however, our impression is that most OWLS are no more successful than ours; nor have we learned anything that makes us want to do anything differently. This insight has made the book worthwhile for us. However, the book would have been more useful and thought-provoking with a more theoretical and analytical approach.

Taking Flight with OWLS is essentially a book of stories, whose title might appropriately be “How I Did It,” as is the chronicle discovered in Victor Frankenstein’s lab in Mel Brooks’ satiric film *Young Frankenstein*. Many of these stories make for interesting reading. However, because most of them are structured as narratives and situated quite locally, I found myself having to sift through them, looking for kernels of truth, generalizable ideas, perhaps theories, that could be applied in other contexts. Of course, many of these “stories” did draw conclusions, most of them similar to those my assistant and I had already suspected: that OWLS are most useful when students are unable to come in for face-to-face (f2f) consultations (working students or students in remote locations), that it is difficult to get students to use them, that they are best suited for short questions rather than discussions of full text, that they tend to focus more on the text than on the student, that they tend to promote a

fix-it shop mentality, but that they are sometimes very useful for students who are more comfortable writing than speaking f2f. These are the conclusions I drew from reading the various narratives, and what would have been helpful to me would have been an introduction that summarized and analyzed these ideas, thereby providing a critical focus to the book and problematizing some of the issues.

This is not to say that *Taking Flight with OWLS* does not contain some important ideas. Subtitled “Examining Electronic Writing Center Work,” the book is structured according to different models of on-line tutoring, both synchronous and asynchronous, and also discusses other good ideas for incorporating technology into the writing center, such as on-line scheduling systems and posting materials on web sites. The first section examines the potential of incorporating technology into writing center work, using survey research to assess students’ and tutors’ reactions. Mark Shadle, in “The Spotted OWL: On-line Writing Labs as Sites of Diversity, Controversy, and Identity,” reports on the results of 67 surveys from 39 states which indicate considerable resistance to the use of OWLS and the tendency for them not to receive a great deal of use. Nevertheless, Shadle concludes that OWLS have the potential to change how we think of the writing center, urges people to keep working on their OWLS, and provides a checklist for creating one. This first section also includes an excellent historical overview of OWLS by Lady Falls Brown, which also provides valuable suggestions for staffing and funding, and a report by Andy Curtis and Tim Roskams on the

use of OWLS in Asia. This article notes that students’ expectations of what to expect from tutors’ responses on the OWL parallel similar expectations in f2f conferences—for example, that Asian students tend to feel that the majority of information should be coming from teachers.

The second section titled “Narratives of Experience” presents five narratives of how various writing centers have incorporated OWLS into their pedagogy. Denise Weeks notes that on-line tutorials require considerable forethought and preparation and emphasizes that virtual access should not replace f2f interaction. In “Writing in the Electronic Realm: Incorporating a New Medium Into the work of the writing Center,” Sharon Thomas, Mark Hara, and Danielle DeVoss discuss how instructors in a first year composition course required students to e-mail their papers to a writing center account and then later piloted an Internet Relay Chat program. Their article makes the interesting observation that on-line tutorials tend to be more evaluative and rigid, focusing more on the text than on the student, and that “on-line conversations mask some important non-verbal cues such as facial expression and tone of voice.”

Section III, focusing on asynchronous electronic tutoring, begins with “The Asynchronous, On-line Writing Session: A Two-Way Stab in the Dark,” a cogently written article that addresses the advantages and disadvantages of asynchronous tutoring. Noting its advantages for off-campus, working students, the article nevertheless points out that this medium fails to foster on-going dialogue, promotes a

fix-it shop mentality, does not enable students to understand their assignments, and, overall, is inferior to f2f interchanges. This perspective is similar to that of the next article, "The Anxieties of Distance: On-line Tutors Reflect," which reports that ESL students have difficulty understanding tutor feedback. More positive experiences are reported in "E-Mail Tutoring and Apprehensive Writers: What Research Tells Us," citing the advantages of psychological distance for apprehensive students, as are several articles in Section IV, focusing on "Synchronous Electronic Tutoring," which describe a Web-based system in which students and tutors work together on a paper which both can view simultaneously. Some of the issues discussed in this section, however, seemed to be of interest to only a few OWL users, for example, the problem of disorderly students, who engage in virtual misbehavior in MOO sessions (crude, rude, and lewd comments and gestures).

The most thought-provoking section is the fifth one, titled "Looking to the Future" which speculates on how computer technology may affect instruction, administration, and research in writing centers. Most notable in this section is Muriel Harris' essay "Making Up tomorrow's Agenda and Shopping Lists Today: Preparing for Future Technologies in Writing Centers," which raises questions about how writing centers can use technology to help students develop useful search strategies in order to deal with the information overload. Harris cautions that it is important to allow time to consider how technology can be used to further a center's mission and observes that some OWLs are constructed (hatched) without adequate consideration of how and why they should be used. This section, however, also suggests that because technology is here to stay that writing centers must explore the potential of OWLs, even if they do not ac-

complish the same goals as f2f consultations, a position that is worth considering but difficult, and perhaps, not practical, to implement. Eric Crump's idea that because writing centers are on the margins, they are uniquely situated to embrace the innovative is interesting in theory, but it also suggests a "let's do it because we can" attitude that may not yield worthwhile results.

It is always useful to hear about what other writing center directors are doing with technology, and I am glad that I read *Taking Flight with OWLs*. However, the information in the book might have been more easily accessible and more useful if each chapter had been assigned a structure built around specific questions (this was the strategy used in *Writing Centers in Context*) and if the book had been developed in the context of an overriding theoretical perspective.

Reviewed by Karen Rowan (State University of New York, Albany, NY)

Balancing Enthusiasm and Skepticism

I confess: though I've served as webmaster for two OWLs, I'm still skeptical about the enterprise of online writing labs. In fact, I resisted incorporating online tutoring in both situations, unconvinced that there was a clear need or substantial pedagogical support for such work in either case. While I readily admit my skepticism, I also appreciate the possibilities on-line tutoring provide and I, like many writing center professionals, do want to learn more about the possibilities and challenges that OWLs present us.

In *Taking Flight with OWLs*, editors Donna Sewell and James Inman anticipated my kind, and in their introduction to the collection they note the critical stance toward technology in writing centers evidenced by several essays in *Wiring the Writing Center*.

In fact, Neal Lerner goes so far as to posit that skepticism "may be our greatest asset" (xxix). In this collection, Sewell and Inman write that their "critical perspective on technology use is not as skeptical, [but] we do acknowledge and respect the stances that these . . . scholars are taking" (xxix). Certainly, I wouldn't ask anyone to give up their enthusiasm for technology, but I did hope to read in this collection essays which balance enthusiasm for new technologies and their pedagogical uses with the skepticism that many of us feel for the way these technologies are employed and work.

Sewell and Inman explain that their goal was to move away from strictly anecdotal accounts of OWLs and more towards research on and theorizing about the various ways OWLs work or

don't work (xix). I should note that while this collection seeks to move beyond anecdotal evidence, many of the writers of these essays elected to incorporate local stories into their accounts. So often, context is a key element when we talk about the work we do in writing centers, virtual or otherwise, and many of the authors of these essays ground their studies in particular contexts, working to strike a balance between the particular and the general.

Essays such as Jamie Thurber's "Synchronous Internet Tutoring: Bridging the Gap in Distance Education" and Mark Mabrito's "Email Tutoring and Apprehensive Writers: What Research Tells Us" point to the importance of context. Though many of the writers in this collection claim or suggest that online tutoring is no

longer an option for writing centers, in no case is that more true than in the situation Thurber describes. In a state where students may live 800 miles from the nearest campus, the director of the University of Alaska at Fairbanks' writing center saw a need to reach off-campus students, thus providing access to the same kinds of support services available to on-campus students. Online tutoring, in this context, is not a luxury; it is a necessity. But what about when students *are* on campus? Mabrito's essay explores the benefits of online tutoring for apprehensive writers and reinforces what writing center folks have been saying all along—that not all students learn the same way and that writing center tutors need to investigate a variety of pedagogical strategies to meet the needs of all our students. Reading these and other essays, I'm more convinced of the potential benefits of online tutorials, yet I'm still wary of the way they're put into action.

Paradoxically, the essays that evidenced the most skepticism (or, at least, caution) about OWLs in action were the ones that made me the most hopeful about the possibilities. In "The Culture of Technology in the Writing Center: Reinvigorating the Theory-Practice Debate," Randall L. Beebe and Mary J. Boneville argue that we need to resist the tendency to think of technology only or primarily in practical terms (48) and carefully "theorize the center's presence, space, and identity on the Web and then find a way to make that identity real" (46). The goal of such theorization is to use technology to bridge the theory-practice gap in writing center work while remaining critically aware of the complexities of technology and the ways it "can both augment and offset current educational cultures and practices" (42). In "Cyberspace and Sofas: Dialogic Spaces and the Making of an Online Writing Lab," Eric Miraglia and Joel Norris present a narrative of how such theorization worked in their center, describing the process of the dialogic conversations they argue

should be an element of imagining, developing, and maintaining OWLs. Joanna Castner's essay, "The Asynchronous, Online Writing Session: A Two-Way Stab in the Dark?," reinforces Miraglia and Norris' call for dialogue. Castner saw failure as an opportunity for investigation and reports on a study she conducted to understand why online clients never responded to tutors' responses to their texts. Castner concludes that writing centers need to ground their use of technology in contexts and use technology in ways consistent with writing center pedagogies and supportive of dialogue.

Though these essays stress the specific contexts and particularities of OWLs, there are, of course, common features to our work, which show up as threads and themes in these essays. For instance, many of these essays point to the benefits and difficulties of responding to writing in writing and what that means for how OWLs are put into action. In "Cyberspace and Sofas," Miraglia and Norris acknowledge that new and experienced tutors alike are challenged by the job of responding to students' texts in writing, but it is precisely this sort of challenge that cannot be sidestepped if OWLs are to enact the theoretical and pedagogical principles of writing centers. In "The Anxieties of Distance: Online Tutors Reflect," David A. Carlson and Eileen Apperson-Williams turn this challenge into an advantage. They cite a novice tutor's statement that "[p]erhaps the greatest advantage of online tutoring is that it is a dialogue concerning better writing that occurs in the form of writing" (138). These authors suggest, then, that we must devote a substantial amount of time and energy to ensuring that we anticipate our tutors' needs as well as our clients; when tutors do learn how to engage writers in dialogue about their writing in writing, *both* tutors and clients benefit.

In "How Many Technoprovocateurs Does It Take to Create Intervarsity?," the concluding essay to *Taking Flight With OWLs*, Eric Hobson addresses the

tension between hype and skepticism, writing that developing online writing centers "is almost like driving a car by stomping on the accelerator and the brakes at the same time. . . . We are propelled forward by our vision of new possibilities enabled by the net, whereas political constraints prevent us from fully exploring those new realms" (224). He advocates hype, arguing that we need it "because it describes for us the possibilities that do not exist in the realm of the status quo" (225), and encourages us "to take our collective feet off the brakes" (233). If political constraints were the only source of skepticism about OWLs, I might agree more with Hobson's call to ease off the brakes than I do. In truth, the reason that I'm still driving in the slow lane is because I wonder whether we as a field have taken enough time to fully investigate the theoretical and pedagogical implications of OWLs, and I've only gotten a glimpse of the kind of research and scholarship that will help to answer my questions. In other words, I want to see more detailed maps before I go hot-rodding into technology.

To switch metaphors, I suggest that hype is best served as an appetizer to a substantial entree of research and scholarship, the type of work Sewell and Inman hoped to gather in this collection. While several of the essays in *Taking Flight with OWLs* are provocative and energizing, others fail to move beyond the kind of here's-the-story-of-our-OWL narratives that may whet our appetite but leave us wanting more. To my mind, the unevenness of this collection has more to do with the format than with the individual authors. What is needed, it seems to me, is not another collection of essays about OWLs, but a single-authored (or co-authored), book-length investigation in which the themes suggested in these essays could be teased out and analyzed in depth. *Taking Flight with OWLs* is a step in the right direction, towards the kind of research and theorizing skeptics and enthusiasts alike are starving for, but it's ultimately not as satisfying as I'd hoped.

East Central Writing Centers Association

March 23-24, 2001
 Granville, OH
"Inquiry and Innovation: Images of Writing Centers"
 Keynote speakers: Joan Mullin and Mike Palmquist

Submit a 250-300 word abstract, including the following information: Names of presenters; institution name; contact person's e-mail, phone, and mailing address; title of presentation; kind of presentation (roundtable, panel, workshop, presentation); amount of time requested (50-minute workshop, panel, roundtable; 20-minute presentation); equipment request. Proposal deadline: January 15, 2001.

Mail all proposals, registration, and other correspondence to Cindy Johaneck, English Department, Denison University, Granville, OH 43023. Phone: 740-788-9288. E-mail johaneck@denison.edu. (Conference information, hotel information, and registration forms will soon be available online: www.denison.edu/ecwca2001.) Conference fees (deadline March 9): Faculty \$70.00; Students and part-time faculty \$35.00

Calendar for Writing Centers Associations

Sept. 28-30: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in Minneapolis, MN
Contact: either Suzanne M. Swiderski at sswidlers@loras.edu or Larry D. Harred at larry.d.harred@uwrf.edu Conference website: <http://www.macalester.edu/~mwca>

Feb. 16-18, 2001: Southeastern Writing Centers Association, in Auburn, AL
Contact: Isabelle Thompson, Auburn University (thompis@groupwise1.duc.auburn.edu) and Glenda Conway, University of Montevallo (conwayg@montevallo.edu)

November 2-4, 2000. National Writing Centers Association in conjunction with the Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association, in Baltimore, MD. Conference website: <http://www.english.udel.edu/wc/mawca/nwcacon.html>

March 23-24, 2001: East Central Writing Centers Association, in Granville, OH
Contact: Cindy Johaneck, English Dept., Denison University, Granville, OH 43023. Ph: 740-788-9288; e-mail johaneck@denison.edu. Conference website: <http://www.denison.edu/ecwca2001>

Writing Center Administration Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN

Description: Beginning associate professor with specialization in writing center administration to teach graduate courses in writing center administration and undergraduate courses in tutoring writing; prepare and mentor graduate and undergraduate writing tutors; and assist with administration and eventually assume direction of Purdue Writing Lab. Starting date of August 13, 2001.

Qualifications: Ph.D. in English or related area with concentration in rhetoric and composition required. Significant publications, teaching experience in a wide range of undergraduate writing courses, and administrative experience in a writing center setting required. Publications in writing center theory, administration, and pedagogy and interests in application of technology to writing centers preferred. Interest in writing across the curriculum and working with Ph.D. students desirable.

Application Process: Review of completed application files will begin October 15 and continue until position is filled. Initial phone interviews will be conducted prior to winter break. Send letter of application describing administrative experience, c.v., published writing sample, evidence of teaching excellence, and three letters of recommendation to:

Thomas P. Adler
 Head, Department of English
 Purdue University
 1356 Heavilon Hall
 West Lafayette, IN 47907-1356

Purdue University is an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer

TUTORS' COLUMN

That warm fuzzy feeling

"My heart is singing for joy this morning. A miracle has happened! The light of understanding has shone upon my little pupil's mind, and behold, all things are changed!"

—Annie Sullivan

There is no refutation against the idea that tutoring is beneficial to the tutee; if it were not, such a system would no longer be in existence. But what about benefits for the tutor? There must be some reason we keep doing this—besides the minimum wage, of course. Well it does look good on grad school applications, but even that does not seem like *that* much incentive, especially for those of us who have no intention of going to grad school. Then, of course, the concession must be made for that warm fuzzy feeling that comes with helping others.

To find the answer to my question I interviewed a few of my fellow tutors with varied experience, as well as a tutor-to-be. Jennifer is a junior Creative Writing major who will begin at the Writing Center next semester; Alicia is a sophomore Equine Studies/Art major who is in the tutor training class and her first semester of tutoring; Shelley is a junior Equine Studies/English major who is presently in tutor training, but began tutoring last semester, like myself; and Kelly who is a fifth-year intern for the English department and has been tutoring for about two years.

When I asked, "What are some of the benefits you feel you have acquired from being a writing tutor?" I received answers that coincided with my own and a few that hadn't occurred to me. On the personal level Alicia feels that

she has gained knowledge on a diversity of subjects and learned about different cultures. She also claims that tutoring "helps interpersonal skills," which is something I too have observed in myself. In the same vein, Shelley stated that she has acquired "better communication skills." Kelly, too, said that she has learned "how to relate to people and not step too much on their feelings." She also has gained a "good sense of how much people invest in their writing," which interests her as an English major.

The second question I asked my fellow tutors was, "Do you feel being a writing tutor has helped your own writing? If so, how?" Shelley had the most unique answer when she said tutoring has made her "pay attention more to how things are said" and realize the effectiveness of saying the same thing in different ways. The universal answer everyone I interviewed gave was the improvement in their own grammar, even if only subconsciously as Shelley claimed. Jennifer hopes to gain insights into her weaknesses, which I found very interesting, because I think that is fundamentally what we have all gained in some form or another. Tutoring gives us a taste of the other side of education, which can only lead to improvements in our own writing simply by increased awareness and exposure. Alicia, on the other hand, did not see many benefits to herself; despite seeing "what mistakes other people make," she feels she makes different mistakes than the people she has tutored. She did concede though that tutoring has helped her grammar somewhat.

After hearing what my fellow tutors had to say, the wheels started turning

in my own head. Personally I feel that I have mostly gained an awareness of what I write. I have become much more conscious of why I use certain words, why something is grammatically correct, why something I write is effective. Tutoring has also allowed me to develop an objectiveness toward my own papers, which was something that I previously had trouble with. Unlike Jennifer I did not realize how much I would gain by becoming a tutor. I was simply flattered to be recommended and thought it sounded interesting. There was some hope I would improve my interpersonal skills, but beyond that I couldn't see how much being a tutor would let me grow.

How blind I was! Like the other tutors and as I expected, my interpersonal skills have improved. I too have also learned information on many topics from tutoring papers in other subject areas, especially English as a second language. I think that my patience has improved, as has my humility (it is an interesting feeling the first time an ESL student corrects your grammar). And, I must admit, after a good tutoring session that warm fuzzy feeling *is* there, so I have found the answer to my question and now am left to wonder only if tutors don't get more out of tutoring sessions than tutees.

*Indigo Fleming-Powers
The University of Findlay
Findlay, Ohio*

Partnow, Elaine, ed. *The New Quotable Woman: The Definitive Treasury of Notable Words by Women from Eve to the Present*. New York: Meridian, 1993.

Web Study

Smarthinking.com: <http://smarthinking.com>

Reviewed by Holly Moe (Modesto Junior College, Modesto, CA)

“Smarthinking.com – online writing lab or jiffy editing service?”

I have five semesters of experience tutoring in a writing center and an insatiable interest in computers and the Internet. So I was fascinated to learn of an online writing lab that is part of Smarthinking, a commercial company in whose pilot program my college, Modesto Junior College, participated. I wondered if this service could really help students become better writers.

Smarthinking defined

According to their homepage, Smarthinking is “a Washington, D.C.-based educational organization, [which] provides students in higher education with real-time tutoring through [its] online environment.” Their Online Writing Lab “offers students personalized assistance within 24 hours in such areas as improved writing technique, paper critiques, and editing tips.” By “revolutionizing education,” the creators of Smarthinking claim to be “making education more accessible than it has ever been.”

The online tutors working for the Smarthinking program are “e-structors” who “have substantial experience in tutoring and/or teaching in their given field and participate in a robust online training program and tutorial practicum.” Beth Hewett, Smarthinking’s Online Writing Lab’s coordinator, clarified the current qualifications: “Most of our e-structors have a Master’s Degree or Ph.D.; some have several advanced degrees and everyone has coursework beyond the Bachelor’s Degree. Everyone has writing-specific training and experience as a college teacher and/or tutor. These are qualifications that we use when screening and interviewing prospective e-structors; beyond hiring, everyone experiences an intensive training period and frequent evaluations” (Hewett.)

What do students think of Smarthinking?

The first step in my research was to survey the students at Modesto who had used Smarthinking. My first survey received sixty-five anonymous responses to the following questions:

- Question #1 asked students to rate the overall experience on a scale of one to ten, one being poor, ten being wonderful. Three students rated it 1-3, eighteen rated it 4-7, and 44 rated it 8-10. One student who rated the experience a 1 noted, “I couldn’t get it to work,” while another who rated the experience a 10 praised the service saying, “I liked the fact that they tell you what you did wrong and also give you advice on how it would sound better.”
- Question #2 asked the students to rate the helpfulness of the e-structor on the same scale. One student rated him/her 1-3, sixteen rated him/her 4-7, forty-eight rated him/her 8-10. One student justified his/her rating by saying that the service is “good but I would rather have something explained to me.” Another student who rated the e-structor a 10, explained that the e-structor “stated what needed to be improved and gave her [the e-structor’s] example of what could make it better.”
- Question #3 asked students to rate the service on convenience. Two students rated it 1-3, fourteen rated it 4-7, forty-nine rated it 8-10. One student explained a low rating by noting, “the service is not so convenient for me [because] I do not own a computer.” However, for those with computers and Internet access at home, the service was rated high on convenience because, as many students noted, “I could access it anytime I need[ed] it.”
- Question #4 asked students to list what flaws, if any, they saw in the Smarthinking program. Forty-three students responded that they saw no flaws in the program. Two students noted that they experienced difficulty due to the e-structor’s lack of familiarity/understanding with/of the assignment. One student claimed that one flaw exists in the markup of the essay being interrupting. Another complained that there is no way to resubmit his/her essay to the same e-structor. Two students felt that e-structors should not mark grammar errors unless asked to do so. Two students complained about the program being impersonal. Six students did not like the fact that there is no interaction/discussion between the student and the tutor, and five students felt there is a flaw in the lack of instant feedback and being forced to wait twenty-four hours for the answer to a question.

Students were then asked to list the strengths, if any, of the program. Nine students saw no strengths in the program. Sixteen students liked its convenience. Five students enjoyed the anonymity of submission and lack of interaction. Twenty-four students felt that the e-structors helped with the essay they had submitted.

My follow-up survey to look at how often students were using Smarthinking and what they were

learning received thirty-two anonymous responses. When asked how many times they had used Smarthinking without being instructed to do so, ten students had not, eleven students had only used it once, nine had used it two to three times and two had used it more than three times. The survey then asked the students how often they intend to use Smarthinking next semester. Five students marked they would not use it, six that they would use it one or two times, five that they would use it three to five times, four that they would use it five to ten times, nine that they would use it consistently, and three were unsure how often they would use it. Students were then asked what, if anything, they were learning from Smarthinking. Of the twenty-three who answered, twelve noted that they had learned something pertaining to grammar. Four were learning about developing their essays, two were learning to focus their essays, and two were learning to organize their essays. Two students noted that they were not learning anything.

To receive a more personal response, I conducted four personal interviews. From these interviews, I learned that the e-structors were working on all areas of the writing process (focus, organization, development, and grammar), that these participants did not use most of the comments they received, and that they did not feel as if they were learning anything from Smarthinking. When asked if they would submit documents to Smarthinking in the future, two said yes and two said no. I also asked the students what they liked and disliked about Smarthinking. Participant 1 liked the “instant gratification” and disliked the lack of interaction. Participant 2 liked the twenty-four hour wait but disliked that “it is hard to submit essays.” Although participant 3 liked the “chance to hear outside comments,” he/she thought “they make too many unnecessary [sic] comments.” Participant 4 noted that when the comments are “on target” they are

helpful, but he/she disliked that sometimes “the comments . . . are not even related to the writing assignment.”

My analysis of the results seems to indicate that students are pleased with the Smarthinking program. However, they are not always aware of what is best for them. A majority who are pleased with the program are pleased because of the program’s convenience. Although convenience is a positive attribute, if students are not really learning enough, convenience is not of much importance. According to the interviews and follow-up surveys, many students did not feel they were learning anything useful for more than just the essay they had submitted. While it is wonderful that a student can receive an A on an assignment an e-structor edited, is it feasible to believe the student will repeat the performance without the e-structor’s help? I think not. Although 2% of respondents rated the Smarthinking experience as poor, and 15% rated it wonderful, it is important to remember why students rated it as such. If convenience is the major aspect students are pleased with (in other words, they are more pleased with the convenience of the program than the help they are receiving.), I doubt whether Smarthinking is really helping students become better writers.

My personal experiences with Smarthinking have been both positive and negative. On the first essay I submitted, the e-structor misread the prompt and offered me all the wrong solutions. Furthermore, he/she edited my sentences, changing my voice and my meaning. A less experienced writer may have followed this e-structor’s comments and placed errors in his/her paper. On my second paper, the e-structor was quite helpful in pointing out areas in which I needed to add development and clarity. On my third paper, the e-structor focused solely on grammar errors (also known as typos) even though I had noted the paper was a first draft and I was only looking for

focus, organization and development (FOD) comments. A less experienced writer may have assumed that his/her FOD was fine and proceeded to work on grammar. On the fourth paper, the e-structor lacked objectivity and asked irrelevant questions. An inexperienced writer may have taken the e-structor’s suggestions and damaged the focus of his/her paper. The conclusion I draw from these incidents is that a few experienced writers may actually benefit from the availability of a jiffy-editing service. After all, it is much more convenient to submit a document to Smarthinking for an editing session than it is to actually proofread a document for typos and grammar errors. However, I believe Smarthinking should be providing writing assistance to students who are in need of it, not a grammar-check to students who are too lazy to proofread.

What do instructors think of the Smarthinking program?

The only way to answer this question was to interview the instructors who had their students submit essays to Smarthinking. Of the three instructors whose students had submitted documents to Smarthinking, Participants 1 and 2 teach development writers, and participant 3 teaches a high-level English elective course.

Participant 1 required his/her students to submit documents to Smarthinking twice. Participant 2 required it once officially and numerous times unofficially. Participant 3 required it several times. All collected the e-structors’ comments. Participant 1 noted that the e-structors most commonly commented on focus and organization. Participant 2 responded that the e-structors commented mostly on focus because focus was what he/she asked them to look at. Participant 3 did not respond to the question regarding which comments were most prominent.

The instructors were then asked what they believe their students are learning

about their writing that they can utilize now and in the future. Participant 1 responded, “how to translate ‘English teacherese.’ . . . They may also be learning that there are real people out there genuinely interested and responsive to their writing—it is not just a one-teacher/one-student academic thing.” Participant 2 felt his/her students are learning “a sense of audience” and “how to write reader-based prose instead of writer-based prose.” Participant 3 believed the amount and content of learning varies depending on the student. He/she noted that while some “seem to become more aware of various elements such as organization, focus, or development,” others “don’t LEARN much of anything.” He/she also noted that students said “they haven’t learned much of anything that can be used on a paper other than the one they are currently writing.”

The next two questions asked the instructors what they like and dislike about the Smarthinking program. Participant 1 noted that the e-structors are “selective and not indiscriminate in their comments,” but disliked that they “misunderstand the prompt.” Participant 2 liked the convenience of Smarthinking but disliked the lack of interaction and the marked-up essay (he/she saw this as editing.). Participant 3 liked the way the service “helps writers see how others perceive their ideas,” but disliked the editing with little or no explanation, the focus on surface errors when the content needs revision, the incorrect grammar corrections, the lack of interaction, and the fact that e-structors cannot check for learning.

When asked how often, if at all, future students would be required to submit papers to Smarthinking. Participant 1 said “probably so,” but he/she did not know how often they will be required to do so. Participant 2 will require his/her students to submit papers “once or twice based on need” because it “makes the final grading process

much easier.” Participant 3 will “probably” require it “from first draft through final draft” because “it does cause the writers to get drafts in on time, gives writers a sense of how others see their papers, and causes writers to think critically about the responses and therefore become more engaged with their own work.”

By forcing students to submit their documents to Smarthinking, instructors can discover if a prompt is clear and simplify their grading process because the e-structor has performed much of his/her work for him/her. Unfortunately, the mission of the Smarthinking program is not to simplify an instructor’s job; it is to “serve the changing needs of today’s students.”

Does Smarthinking run contrary to basic writing center principles/procedures?

To find the answer to this question, I posted a question on WCenter: “Do any of you in writing centers allow students to drop off papers, leave the center, and return to pick up an ‘edited’ paper (or a paper with comments on it) in a few hours? No personal student contact or collaboration with a tutor or peer consultant is involved in this type of process. Please explain the reason(s) you do or do not allow this.” This question prompted many responses. David Shein (Bard College) noted such a service is not available in his writing center because “tutoring is a species of student development. . . . We are interested in producing better students, not better papers. Until someone can show me the developmental value of acting as a copy-editing service, we will continue to refuse to act as one.” Joan Hawthorn (University of North Dakota) emphasizes this idea by writing, “our rationale [for not permitting such a process] has to do with wanting to work with rather than for the writer. Clyde Moneyhun (University of Delaware) explained his “no” by writing, “editing papers runs counter to everything we believe in. We are not an edit-

ing service. We are writing teachers.”

The answer to this question can also be found in many tutor-training texts. *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring* offers a section based upon online tutoring. The first basic policy mentioned is “no writing center we know of allows writers to drop off their drafts and come back for comments. We involve writers in the revision process, make them part of the dialogue in hopes that they will not only produce a better text but become better writers. We want online tutoring to offer the same benefits to writers” (Gillespie and Lerner 142).

Is Smarthinking an online writing lab or a jiffy-editing service?

To answer this question, I pulled *Webster’s II College Dictionary* off the shelf. It is obvious that Smarthinking is working with writing online, so those word choices are fine. Clearly, the online environment of Smarthinking is not a laboratory. However, the word “service” is defined as “work done for others as an occupation or business” or “an act of assistance.” According to these definitions, “online writing service” would be a more appropriate name than “online writing lab.” But there is another option. The word “jiffy” means “a short period of time.” Smarthinking’s promise to offer “personalized assistance within 24 hours” would qualify it as a jiffy service. The word “edit” is defined as “to prepare for publication or presentation, as by adapting or correcting.” According to the students who participated in the original survey, this definition accurately describes Smarthinking’s assistance. One noted that the e-structor “made corrections and suggestions on my paper.” Another pointed out, “they correct your mistakes,” and another wrote, “I didn’t have to talk to anyone but [my essay] got corrected.” Another praised the program, saying, “your paper does look much better,” and a different student noted that the strength of the program “is that your final paper

will be more polished.” Students submit their documents to Smarthinking and receive a version that has been “corrected.” These students’ essays have not been read by an online writing lab; they have been read by a Jiffy-Editing Service.

The question arising from this is whether or not students can receive long-term benefits from an editing service. The obvious and simple answer is no; students cannot, in the long term, benefit from an editing service. Having someone correct their papers and edit sentences into them with no interaction, discussion, or opportunity to integrate new information will not help students become better, more thoughtful writers. It may benefit them temporarily in that they may receive A’s on their edited documents, but if they cannot repeat the performance on their own, they will continue to struggle with writing and receive no long-term

benefits. Thus, a jiffy editing service is not what students need; they need real assistance that will teach them skills to improve their writing.

*Holly Moe
Modesto Junior College
Modesto, California*

This article is a condensed version of a research paper. If you would like to see the work in its entirety, send me a request via e-mail, and I will forward the document to you. Please send all correspondence to:

hollyberry84@hotmail.com

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