Chapter X

The State of Online Writing Labs: Have They Fulfilled Their Potential?

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Abstract

This chapter analyzes the “state of the art” of OWLs, or online writing labs. It reports the results of a study of 343 OWLs that examined the extent to which OWLs have emerged into what Crump calls “true OWLs”—fully-interactive OWLs where tutors provide individualized help to students via computer-mediated communication like email. This chapter also examines what the literature and research on online tutoring say about the advantages and disadvantages of online tutoring in comparison with face-to-face tutoring. It is hoped that this chapter can illuminate the extent to which OWLs have fulfilled their promise to be places where students and tutors can freely exchange ideas and texts. It is also hoped that this chapter can suggest the extent to which OWL services can be expanded and improved.
Introduction

The online writing labs and centers of universities and colleges (commonly called “OWLs”) once garnered an incredible amount of praise for their potential to be “places” where writers, especially student writers, could interact with tutors, freely exchanging ideas and texts. Although time has moderated initial optimism surrounding OWLs to some degree, it is clear that OWLs have emerged as an important means of delivering writing assistance to students both physically near and distant (as well as to university faculty and staff and, sometimes, community members).

This chapter offers an analysis of the “state of the art” of OWLs. First, I report the results of a study of 343 OWLs. In this study, I investigated the extent to which OWLs have emerged into what Crump (2000, p. 225) calls “true OWLs”—interactive OWLs where tutors provide individualized help to students on their papers via computer-mediated communication like email and MOOs. I also explore what the literature and research on online tutoring suggest about its disadvantages and advantages when compared with face-to-face tutoring. I explore these issues in terms of tutoring professional (such as business, technical, and science) writing online. I also discuss some of the resources and services related to professional writing that are available through OWLs, and I discuss how these offerings might be expanded and improved.

Background on OWLs

Since the early days of OWL development, those who work in and research OWL environments have claimed that the benefits of OWLs are evident at both theoretical and practical levels. Monroe (1998), for example, claims that tutoring via email is more dynamic than face-to-face (F2F) tutoring and challenges “ideologies of print and academic literacy” (Monroe, 1998, p. 23). Coogan (1995) claims that email tutoring “invigorates the tutoring process” by “channeling the social energy of reading a person into the reading of a text” (p. 179).

The more practical benefits of OWLs, according to OWL administrators, include increased opportunities for distance learning (e.g., Beebe & Boneville, 2000, p. 46) and for outreach (Brown, 2000, p. 27). An example of successful collaboration via an OWL is that between graduate student tutors at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and community college students at Roane State Community College in Tennessee (described in Jordan-Henley & Maid, 1995). This project is often cited as an example of how online tutoring can broaden the “spatial and temporal dynamics” of a writing center (Leander, 2000, p. 667).
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