Online Writing Labs: Conditions Ripe for Community

I. Introduction

"By creating a home in cyberspace for active, self-sponsored, and social learning, the writing lab would advance its own pedagogical values while simultaneously securing its position as the digital paradigm progresses." Eric Miraglia & Joel Norris, Washington State University

Online Writing Laboratories, or OWLs, have created fertile conditions for the growth of learning communities. They are a common destination for large groups of visitors with similar goals and similar needs. They have very clear-cut reasons for being: to serve those who are too far, too time-strapped or too nervous to visit a physical Writing Center. Users are motivated by external factors (better grades) and internal factors (greater confidence). And no small point, learning about writing has been shown to flourish in collaborative, constructive settings. "The idea of a community of learners is based on the premise that learning occurs as people participate in shared endeavors with others, with all playing active but often asymmetrical roles in sociocultural activity," Rogoff writes. The idea, then, is in place.

The reality of OWLs, however, looks more like a patchwork of true innovation and off-line tradition slapped onto the Internet. Though the word "community" is used frequently to describe OWLs, the labs rarely have a set group of members and often result in a one-way dialogue from tutor to tutee. There are synchronous tutoring sessions and email "cybertutorials," online writing galleries and listserv discussions, weekly newsletters and online courses. The thinking is there, clearly, but each feature was developed by a different university, with a different OWL, with a different purpose. What happened, and where do we go from here?
II. Background

"We needed something to serve our students, but now we help businessmen around the world who have questions about English as a second language, teachers in rural communities who use our handouts because they don't have books, and other universities that are establishing their own OWLs." Muriel Harris, Purdue University

The Online Writing Laboratory began as an extension of the college Writing Center, a drop-in office where students could meet with tutors to receive feedback on their work. Writing Centers were, almost uniformly, designed to help students become better writers - not simply to fix grammar in particular papers. Their directors often tried to create comfortable spaces for the conversations between students and tutors, with cozy furniture and adequate brainstorming supplies. The centers quickly became public spaces: At the University of Pennsylvania, seminars are taught in the attic of the "Writers House," renowned novelists are invited to meet with students, and open mike nights bring local Philadelphia poets to their makeshift stage.

So when Purdue University launched the first-ever Online Writing Lab in 1994, other schools were quick to recognize the potential and follow suit. They even picked up and ran with the acronym heralded by the new lab’s URL - the OWL. OWLs are intended to serve those students (and in some cases, professionals) who are too far, time-strapped or intimidated to get writing help at an off-line Writing Center. Now, more than 100 colleges and universities have developed OWLs, to varying degrees of popularity and success. A 1997 study found that seven-eighths of the 67 schools surveyed considered their OWLs successful, though they offered many different types of services and resources (Shadle, 8). Some OWLs are simply advertisements for their off-line counterparts. Others are stuffed full of writing resources, email and synchronous tutoring, chatrooms for conversations about writing and links to other sites.

As they become more popular with students and professionals (who borrow the university resources to help improve their own writing) OWLs have come under increased scrutiny from administrators and researchers. Directors
worry that the focus on OWLs will take much-needed resources away from the off-line Writing Center. And they fear that students will use the services improperly - as a one-way dialogue from tutor to tutee. For those reasons and others, most OWLs have taken only tentative steps forward over the past decade, and many have retreated to earlier versions because of problems with funding and/or lack of use. But the possibilities for OWLs remain clear: Online Writing Labs can create more confident, capable writers by harnessing the learning potential of collaborative, supportive online environments.

III. Community

"The OWL is more than a tool for making handouts and other materials readily available; the writing center's virtual form becomes a literal focus point for discussion and debate.” Randall Beebe, Eastern Illinois University & Mary Bonevelle, Baker College

Most OWLs define themselves as communities, asking visitors to "register to join the community” or "meet the community of tutors.” In reality, the audience for most of these sites is an ever-moving target of transient students and last-minute professionals. Only the tutors (if there are any) maintain a consistent presence in the OWL community. Sometimes, sites have profiles of these tutors; more often, though, they are identified by amorphous email addresses that offer writing advice.

Though OWL directors might like to see returning students make steady writing progress, this is rarely the case. Studies show that students most often consider the OWL to be a writing service and use it for specific editing purposes. The off-line Writing Center, on the other hand, was designed as a "place for people to be comfortable, to make eye contact, to put their feet up and talk.” In physical Writing Centers, “when they [students] talk about the stories they want to craft, the truths they want to tell and retell, the words that will help them make new meanings for self and audience, you have the real sense of what dialogue is when honed to dialectic... There is a special feeling in a place like that ... epiphanies, as it turns out, and the mild euphoria
they induce, are contagious” (Miraglia & Norris). But just how can OWLs harness that excitement online?

OWLs must create spaces with attitude - inviting, motivating features that add value to the offline center and use the unique powers of the online world. But their task is made all the more difficult because of the variety of types of writers who use the site - not all are English majors inspired by epiphanies. Chemistry students need advice on writing lab reports, communication students on speeches, drama students on scripts and history students on research papers. So just how do OWLs define and encourage community? Let’s take a look at two.

IV. Case Studies

“*It's pretty amazing to be part of a Web site that is truly international. We are sharing knowledge with anyone, anywhere.*” Jon Bush, Purdue University OWL coordinator

The Purdue University Online Writing Lab receives about 7,000 hits a day, and more than 2 million per year. The website ([http://owl.english.purdue.edu/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/)) prides itself on its PDF handouts and “workshops” in PowerPoint and hypertext that teach different writing-related lessons. Many instructors at Purdue and elsewhere use these handouts and presentations - developed by students and professors at Purdue - in their classrooms. Students can also access them online to answer specific writing questions. The staff of 11 update the site frequently with news about new handouts and other features.

In addition, the Purdue OWL provides email tutoring for students and visitors (although the site states that tutors cannot comment extensively on non-Purdue student work). Tutors respond to a tremendous volume of submitted writing, but will not to answer questions about grammar and style - referring requests, instead, to their MLA and APA handouts. The site states that tutors will not proofread or otherwise edit drafts - they are prepared to
comment critically on short papers, or to answer specific questions about longer drafts.

This simple OWL uses hyperlinks to connect different parts of the site, and offers an online tour of its main features. Site staffers compile and send a weekly newsletter that contains grammar tips, questions from readers, and updates about OWL and the Writing Lab. Navigation is clear and easy to use, text is concise and easy to read, and the site’s minimal use of pictures and graphics makes it quick to load. There are a few pictures of staffers (that change when the page is reloaded) on the main page, but no overall metaphor for the site.

The Purdue site is unique because it caters to a very diverse population of students and instructors around the world. However, the site does not promote itself as a community - all tutoring (online and in person) is one-on-one, and the site does not have an online discussion board or chatroom. There is no forum for document sharing or open conversation about the texts. And yet, thousands of people every day use the site for help with their writing.

The Washington State University OWL (http://owl.wsu.edu/) is also web-based, and asks students to “introduce yourself” by registering before they can access some features. Students can post their writing to a “Writers Exchange,” where tutors will respond to the work publicly and other writers can critique writing. Students click on “View Responses” to see comments on their own work, and can access a searchable archive of other papers and responses that may relate to their own work. The site also has synchronous “Talking Text” chatrooms, with “Hooey the Helpful Owl” to guide visitors to appropriate rooms. “With a few clicks of the mouse, you can read and respond to other students’ writing, discover how other writers see your work, chat with students and tutors, and learn about the resources available to writers around WSU and on the Web,” the site text explains. Much like the Purdue OWL, students can submit any kind of writing to “the OWL community” - academic
work, essays, stories, or poetry. Washington State’s OWL tutors usually respond within 48 hours, but will not proofread work.

The WSU OWL uses a bookshelf metaphor on the left-hand margin of its pages, with icons that represent various features of the page. The books will take visitors to the resource library. The computer icon will take users to the Writers Exchange. Other graphics, of a plant and a bubbling lava lamp, are simply used to make the site feel like a space where visitors are welcome to make themselves comfortable, according to the site’s designers. The site also offers QuickTime videos (with voiceovers) showing how to use various features on the site - though difficult to find, these are useful tools.

The public spaces are easy to use and feel inviting. Users submit brief profiles to introduce themselves, and they can choose to send tutors questions privately as well. Finally, the tutors have their own meeting place online - the Tutors Private Parlor, where they can create a true Community of Practice, exchanging tips or chatting about topics of interest.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Purdue OWL</th>
<th>WSU OWL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Launched</strong></td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Staff</strong></td>
<td>2 + volunteer tutors</td>
<td>3 + volunteer tutors</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stated Goals</strong></td>
<td>writing resource for students who want help but can’t visit physical center; complement to classroom instruction; supplement to face-to-face tutorials; stand-alone reference for writers</td>
<td>community for the exchange of writing ideas and feedback; space for conversations about writing; reference resource</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audience</strong></td>
<td>students, teachers and businesspeople around the world</td>
<td>students and tutors across the country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Usage</strong></td>
<td>~7,000 hits per month</td>
<td>~600/month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key features</strong></td>
<td>handouts and online presentations, email tutoring, online tour</td>
<td>public Writers Exchange, Talking Text synchronous chat, visitor profiles, bookshelf metaphor, video-based help</td>
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V. Theoretical Foundation

“Suggesting that knowledge is constructed among social groups and that students need to be acculturated into the academic community, Social Constructivist practice privileges dialogue among student writers (and, by extension among writers and readers) as a means of discovering ideas and developing thinking.” Beth Hewett, Smarthinking

A theoretical perspective on OWLs must consider two angles. One, what pedagogical theories inform the effective teaching of writing? How have these changed as a result of technology? And then, two, how do those theories fit into those about communities of practice? To the first, writing instruction has seen significant changes in the past few decades. Where once writing was seen as a solitary task (essential only to those whose job title included the word “writer”), writing classes are now most often taught to all undergraduates in small seminar format through workshops. Here, students participate in a critical examination of each others' work, offering constructive ideas and suggestions for improvement. This emerging theory in writing instruction is known as social constructivism. Social constructivism suggests that knowledge is built within social groups and that conversation between student writers can help them discover new ideas and develop their thinking.

This theory, popularized by Kenneth Bruffee in the 1980s, proffers that intense collaboration between students, and between instructors and students, can lead to more fully developed writing style and more closely scrutinized writing. As Hewett writes, "Exciting new synchronous tools, like Microsoft’s NetMeeting (see Enders, 2000 and 2001) and SMARTTHINKING, Inc.’s whiteboard environment, engage Social Constructivist theory as tutors coach students and can write with them in the idea development stage, saving the tutorial to an archives for future reference.” This is only the tip of the iceberg for social learning online - but it’s an important point. As technology becomes easier to use, faster online connections become more common, and people become more comfortable reading and writing online, new applications will likely emerge and develop.
Off-line Writing Centers tried to build on the social constructivist theory - creating gathering spaces for writers to talk and exchange ideas. But Online Writing Labs have the potential to provide an even more robust platform for collaboration. But that’s still far from reality; OWLs now - at best - serve as practice fields, enabling “the activity of an individual in a collaborative environment,” rather than the “connections an individual has with the community and the patterns of participation in the community” (Barab & Duffy). In most OWLs, learning may not be truly authentic because it is not “an integral part of the ongoing activity of the society” (Barab & Duffy). If tutors and OWL designers want to create better writers, rather than improve grammar in individual papers, they might do well to consider this notion. Gifford and Enyedy expand on that point: “The focus should be to design activities that help learners develop the ability to carry out socially formulated, goal directed action through the use of mediating material and social structures.”

But rather than allow learning to flourish through interaction in a community - perhaps by giving students the chance to apply their new knowledge in the advising of others - OWLs produce compartmentalized knowledge. The powerful computer-supported learning tools could instead help writers learn through a process of creation.

“Distributed multimedia learning environments ... serve to enrich the capabilities of participants in a communication to express what they are thinking about, to capture traces of that thought in new forms of representation, and to jointly work to create new artefacts. But more importantly, they enable us to see what we are building together, so that as participants in a learning conversation, in which the transformative nature of communication is foregrounded, we can co-construct a new understanding or other learning product.” Roy Pea, 1996

In my opinion, traditional OWLs like Purdue’s fail to create transformative learning, and therefore find themselves in a similar position to the Math Forum site. They provide space for a large volume of resources, provide a forum for asking questions of experts, and assume that the same resources will work for many different types of users. "On the Math Forum site, community and the
learning that it affords are considered to be in a continuous process of evolution,” Renninger explains. In truth, the Math Forum and Purdue OWL communities are far from evolved.

Both might benefit from Blanton’s research into telecommunications and education. As of now, the OWLs and Math Forum try to carefully manage all learning. But Blanton finds that “open, self-directed structures may facilitate participation in telecommunications activity.” He concedes, however, that it is difficult to prove that adequate reflection can be mediated through synchronous and asynchronous online conversations. But this sort of public communication enables novice writers to become “legitimate peripheral participants.” (Lave and Wenger) They can then freely become apprentice writers, learning from and working with experts without the pressure to participate in the full-fledged community of practice.

But to date, there has been little effort to move these learners toward mastery, toward becoming tutors themselves and sharing their new knowledge with others. The model now, in most cases, is that of teacher and student rather than expert and apprentice. “If a writing center aims to facilitate learning by believing in and acting on the social construction of knowledge,” writes Joanna Castner of Texas Tech University, “then failing to foster dialogue between consultant and client contradicts the center’s guiding principles.”

VI. Design Principles

“The design philosophy attempts to get technology out of the way of what was really important: the social, interactive spaces in which patrons and tutors could interact.” Eric Miraglia and Joel Norris, Washington State University

A careful review of the Purdue and Washington State OWLs shows that they do not follow many of the design suggestions from Amy Jo Kim and Etienne Wenger. Though both sites have a defined and articulated purpose, their infrastructure does not necessarily support their stated goal. For example, the Purdue site aims to “supplement face-to-face tutorials,” but does not offer specific features to enable this. Only the Washington State site has
gathering places for its members (the Purdue site doesn’t even have members, per se). Off-line, Purdue recognizes the need for gathering spaces, adding couches and big whiteboards to the Writing Center space for casual conversation and brainstorming. But online, there are no gathering spaces. Even at Washington State’s OWL, the spaces are not “flexible and extensible” as Kim suggests. Instead, they are static, with a single linear format for reading and responding to texts. The member profiles at the Washington State site collect valuable demographic information for the site’s coordinators, but other members cannot see this information or create relationships based on it.

The sites both include a range of roles, including visitors/guests, members, tutors and coordinators – but as noted earlier, there is no flexibility in moving above the “member” level. Though Math Forum considers its members to be leaders – “site participation is a form of leadership since it helps to stretch the thinking of other participants” – Purdue does not even give its members a way to participate actively. Likewise, there are few subgroups enabled by the Purdue or WSU OWLs. The Tutors’ Parlor allows the WSU tutors themselves to form an online subgroup, but members cannot join in the conversation, and can only form temporary subgroups based on their room choice in Talking Text.

There are few cyclical events at either site - although the Purdue OWL offers regular updates where visitors can check for new resources. Both sites mention workshops available through its off-line Writing Center, but these are not translated into synchronous events online. Similarly, there are few rituals of community life - though there are a number of courses at each school that require use of the OWL or Writing Center as part of the coursework. The Purdue OWL does have a weekly newsletter, to keep “members” informed of new resources or events. But this is a very passive ritual for members.

The sites are even less supportive of communities of practice through the eyes and evaluation techniques of Etienne Wenger. To highlight a few:

1. **Presence and visibility:** Though universities do point students to the OWLs through other websites and classroom announcements, there
are no member directories, few impromptu interactions and little visibility of either community.

2. **Rhythm**: Neither OWL has regular meetings or milestones. The WSU site has room for conversation about hot topics, but there are no virtual conferencing or community calendar tools.

3. **Knowledge-generating interactions**: While both OWLs could be considered disseminators of knowledge, only the WSU OWL has synchronous conversation systems to exchange views or discuss ideas. Washington State also provides a system for document sharing, for a roundtable approach to problem-solving in writing.

4. **Short-term value**: This is an interesting component. I would say that the Purdue OWL offers more short-term value to its “members” than even Washington State. They can look up the answers to questions quickly and get answers from tutors within 48 hours. Visitors to the WSU site have to look more deeply for answers to simple questions, and sometimes wait longer for response to their papers. They must also rely on strangers to feel invested enough in the writing process to comment on their papers for a truly collaborative learning experience.

5. **Connections to the world**: Nearly all OWLs supply links to other OWLS, research in the field and new technologies under evaluation. In this way, they are notably more academic in nature than many other online learning communities.

6. **Personal identities**: This area is sorely lacking for nearly all OWLs. While most online communities allow users some way to express themselves at the site, neither OWL in this study (nor any that I could find) allow members to introduce themselves publicly. There is no room for reputation or ranking - enabling students to decide what advice to take and reject. Some OWLs allow tutors to personalize a space, but most don’t even have the flexibility of adding photos or cartoons to their desk as they would in person.
7. **Belongings and relationships**: It is interesting to note that some students are much more comfortable in conversation about their writing online than they are off-line. They find supportive mentoring relationships with tutors and trust their conversations in this space. Both Purdue and WSU enable this sort of interaction for its members.

8. **Evolution and maturation**: The Purdue OWL hasn’t changed much since its original incarnation. They have added the email tutoring service, and continually add other features, but it’s purpose and audience remain the same. WSU seems to be doing more thinking about process and design - its “About the WSU OWL” page mentions a Java chat interface, downloadable users’ manual, stylesheets and bilingual text interface as possible future additions.

Despite several of these significant shortcomings, Purdue and WSU both seem to have designed sites that consider their audience’s exposure and access to technology. They seem to adapt to the late-night use by students and try to respond very quickly (students are procrastinators, we know!), and resist the temptation to control use of the site. Both allow for non-linear navigation, trusting the members to use the site effectively and efficiently.

**VII. Empirical Evidence**

“**SMARTTHINKING is helping us build the kind of innovative education today’s students demand. SMARTTHINKING provides a tool that will help us ensure that any of our students can access the help and support they need, whenever they need it. All our students need is a connection to the Internet.**” Mary Beth Susman, Chief Executive Officer Kentucky Virtual University

Is this a fair rubric for assessing OWLs? Perhaps they wouldn’t serve their stated purpose if they changed into true communities of practice, and should therefore not adhere to the design strategies and theoretical foundations of those communities. Let’s look at some other OWLs, then, and evaluate their successful elements:

The University of Missouri’s-Columbia (http://www.missouri.edu/~writery/index2.html) prides itself not only on it
cybertutorials over email and a synchronous MOO application, but also its Writery Café (in fact, the website opens to the noise of a crowded café). “Sometimes writers just need to talk--to kick around ideas, dream up projects, commiserate about problems, plot & scheme, goof, theorize, etc. If that's what you're looking for, this is the place for you,” explains the website. This discussion listserv, which sends posted emails to a subscriber list, keeps members up to date on activities and gives them a chance to bounce ideas off each other. “The function of facilitating conversations among networks of writers is among the Writery’s more provocative functions, establishing richer contexts for writing than those prescribed in the proscenium classroom and acknowledging the dialogic functions of texts,” writes Paul Johnson. The Writery, then, creates special interest subgroups that help them bond and exchange work.

The Colorado State OWL (http://writing.colostate.edu/) has a gallery for student writing, where visitors can examine their peers’ work. Empire State College has a “Corridor Talk” section where students can swap notes with other students, ask questions, add tips or overcome writing problems. Smarthinking (http://www.smarthinking.com) in Washington, D.C., a private for-profit OWL sends out a student newsletter. The University of Phoenix (http://www.phoenix.edu) has online writing courses. The University of Pennsylvania (http://www.english.upenn.edu/~wh/) has online book groups. The Kentucky Virtual University (http://www.kyvu.org/writeplace/) has synchronous whiteboard tutoring sessions. The University of Richmond has online conferences about writing in different disciplines. The Salt Lake Community College online Writing Center (http://www.slcc.edu/wc/) has a live webcam on its blue couch in the physical writing center. The University of Wisconsin OWL (http://waukesha.uwc.edu/stud/owl/) has lists of favorites for every one of its staff members. Visitors can “archive” pictures at any time. Anyone can volunteer to be trained to work at the SLCC writing center, or join in online writing conversations. And on and on.
Alone, it seems, none of these sites meets the requirements for creating a robust community of practice, where “lurkers” can learn from experts and the group of members can build knowledge together and evolve steadily. But they offer evidence that cheap, simple-to-use technologies can support communities of practice in Online Writing Labs. Though transient, groups of students from different disciplines (not just English majors, as many sites note) can come together to learn and practice writing skills.

What about the empirical evidence of community traits in our two case studies? There is a bit of a contradiction here: the less robust of the two in terms of coordinated community is by far the more popular. The Purdue site is a home for teachers and students who need accurate information quickly - it has gained a reputation as the mother hen (or owl?!) of OWLs. In fact, though the WSU OWL has constructivist discussion forums and collaborative writing spaces, the same names had posted many of the pieces of writing, and it appears as though only tutors had responded to the writing online. (Perhaps untrained students do not feel qualified to dole out advice - but at least they still have the opportunity to lurk in on conversations between other novices and experts.)

The actual advice in tutoring at both the Purdue and WSU OWLs seemed appropriately analytical and sound - good tutoring can happen in any setting. But a study by Joanna Castner at Texas Tech University found that out of 554 email consultations at that school’s OWL, only 12 resulted in continued dialogue. Half of those were graduate students. This shows that creating a collaborative environment is not as simple as providing the technology for conversation - there must be incentive and time for a dialogue. In face to face tutoring, it is nearly impossible to avoid dialogue. It is also difficult to miss the social cues - body language and tone - that add information to the exchange. Finally, issues of trust, anonymity and work privacy are more clear in person than online. Therefore OWLs need to work harder to elicit self-explanation and clarification. They have the advantage of a running tally of the conversation - in writing - that can be referred back to, and are often more successful at
eliciting self-explanation and clarification. So OWLs need to use these elements in creating a sustainable, motivating community.

IX. Future Directions

"[OWLs] serve the subjects of the industrial, mass-production classroom, but they develop rich relationships with those subjects (who then become people), and they often create the conditions for learning communities. The internet is, in a fundamental way, a technology for creating fertile conditions for learning communities to form and evolve.” Eric Crump, National Council of Teachers of English

OWLs of the future must take steps to create full-fledged communities if they hope to take advantage of new, proven learning techniques in writing. They must also evolve in order to sustain themselves as new technologies replace existing ones. In particular, they must use the unique attributes of OWLs to “sell” themselves to students: faster, more convenient tutoring that maintains a permanent record of the conversation and avoids the intimidation factor of having to walk into a physical center. “Researchers have found that computer networking among students provides increased opportunities for collaborative writing and group participation due to the less threatening nature of this environment,” write Mark Mabrito, at Purdue. His studies also found that networked communication also increases overall writing by students. These are key selling points.

But OWLs need to surmount several key social concerns - privacy, knowing students’ work will be kept private if they wish; trust, knowing and having faith in the advice of fellow students and tutors; and anonymity, being able to get feedback on writing without names attached. These are significantly more clear-cut in the physical world, and must be addressed in the online world. For example, students must know who the tutors are, what their backgrounds are and what training they receive - and have access to profiles of other members who are giving advice. Perhaps using a system similar to the e-bay rating system would help tutees feel more comfortable about the advice they’re receiving.
OWLs must also use a combination of technologies similar to those at TappedIn to mimic the off-line classroom workshops that have been so successful to improving the confidence and writing skills of novice writers. "Workshopping" papers online can be a possibility, if moderated appropriately. These workshops would need to develop their own language of writing terms and activities, further tying the group together as a community. This, of course, would take a commitment on the part of the virtual classroom community - and motivation must come from proven success and advertisement (good grades, improved confidence, obviously improved writing skills). They must be brief, targeted and constructive - characteristics to which even off-line workshops aspire.

OWLs would also do well to create more specific target audiences for their sites - only students, or creating spaces for different types of writers. The one-size-fits-all sites like Purdue’s invite occasional visits from resource-hungry teachers and students. But there is no knowledge-building incentive, only information gathering. Visitors need to believe that their interactions with the site will lead to a transformative, growth experience for them. “The interactions within the site should generate active invitations to the community to return to the space, to reconnect with the conversation and (we hoped) to engage the conversation further,” Miraglia and Norris assert.

Tutors, then, need to go out of their way to facilitate conversations, and give clear and convincing explanations (it’s harder online than in person, writing tutors will confirm!). But if the purpose of the sites are also to foster off-line connections to the Writing Center, OWLs also need to tie their sites to the physical centers on campuses across the country. Hold live events for members to gather and meet face to face. Then continue the conversation online. Create an off-line atmosphere that can be mimicked online with welcoming metaphors.

Finally, OWLs must work together to sustain themselves. Whereas off-line, distance limitations require Writing Centers to be established on every college campus in the country, the online arena allows different centers to
share their expertise and skills. Writing centers from different time zones could team up to staff both OWLs (or a single combined OWL) for longer hours. Different schools could focus on different genres of writing (and therefore students in different disciplines) and share resources between them. Schools with technology expertise could share applications (these are not for profit, after all) with schools better suited to developing content. The myriad of sites - and the thin layer of innovation stretched across them - seems the perfect subject for collaboration itself. This means developing a meta-community that considers OWLs as a whole. From this elevated vantage point, the conditions for creating a flourishing writing community (or set of communities) seem ripe for harvest.

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