A SNAPSHOT FROM THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY AND TEACHING OF WRITING

ON THE CHANGING NATURE OF WRITING

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OPENING STATEMENT

The Ohio State University Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing (CSTW) supports writing in a rapidly changing world. For us, that writing — and associated activities like reading, researching, and speaking — is complex and involves shifting audiences, purposes, technologies, and genres. In response to university and off-campus needs over the years, we have developed a diverse set of programs. Because each of these programs has a slightly different set of purposes and clientele, we feel well positioned, not only to answer the questions below, but to promote conversations about the changing nature of writing and writing instruction. We hope this magazine will provide the beginnings of these discussions.

For this year’s magazine, each CSTW program coordinator was asked to consider the following broad questions:

Over the last several years, what has changed about the nature of writing?
What has stayed the same?

We begin with the statements from Trish Houston, coordinator for the Minor in Professional Writing, and Doug Dangler, coordinator for the Writing Center. These programs sit at two important writing nexuses: the minor prepares undergraduates for the professional work world through upper-level writing coursework, while the Writing Center aids self-selected graduate and undergraduate writers from across the university seeking help for all levels of writing. We then move on to two of our smaller, newer programs — Communication Technology Consultants and Digital Media and Writing. Each deals directly with technology and media, areas that seem at first glance to be causing most of the change around us. We finish with the unique perspectives provided by our Outreach, Writing Across the Curriculum, and Research programs. These programs provide support to the greater Columbus community, instructors across the university, and dissertating students and other writing research, respectively.

We hope you will find their comments relevant, and we hope you will respond with your own comments, questions, and suggestions at go.osu.edu/cstw. We will begin to address the complexity of these questions at our Writing Matters in a Changing World conference on February 2, 2013. Please save that date and register for the free conference at go.osu.edu/WMCW.

Dr. Richard (Dickie) Selfe
Director
The continual technological and cultural shifts required of contemporary professional writers necessitate preparing our students not only with a critical understanding of the rhetorical processes underlying communication in various media, but also with the problem-solving skills to address these continual changes.

The Minor in Professional Writing works with undergraduate students from all across the university’s curriculum (from astronomy to communication, from finance to zoology) who are interested in writing in the public arenas of civic life, in the academy, and in the professional world to give them the cognitive knowledge, practical skills, and hands-on experience they will need to write well in the 21st-century workplace. Through the program’s capstone internship, students work with more than 125 Columbus area organizations to professionalize their skills.

Because the professional writing minor’s work is at the intersection between the university and the worlds of work beyond our campus, we have a unique perspective on what has changed, but perhaps more importantly, on what has stayed the same about the nature of good writing. Our core constituencies — our workplace partners, our students, and our alumni — all agree good writing matters greatly.

From tweets to grant proposals, from State House constituency letters to marketing for the Mid-Ohio Foodbank, the internship tasks our students fulfill all incorporate technology in various ways, including social media and its benefits and constraints. But even in digital contexts, our students see firsthand that good writing matters. More than one workplace partner cites the need for “flawless text”: errors and laughably insufficient content can go viral in a click.

One student said: “It does not take a technological genius to figure out that all of these new forms of communication are changing the way we talk to one another. As writers in professional settings, we need to prepare to not only adapt to these changes but also to innovate and think of fresh ideas to capitalize on them.”

While traveling in Asia, Newark writing minor coordinator Liz Weiser observed: “One thing that becomes quite clear in international travel is the enormous emphasis on clear, compelling writing in the global world. As people whose native languages vary come together professionally across borders, it is through writing that they best communicate.”

We contend that writing in small containers is an old thing made new. We still direct our students to consider audience and purpose, voice and tone, and to understand that error-free writing is essential for the companies and organizations they represent. Content is critical regardless of platform, and it is our challenge to ensure that students can bring that perspective to digital contexts, both emerging and future, across the various worlds of work.

Question for conversation:
How should we professionalize students’ writing for the various sectors of the work world, including those associated with your discipline?
Graduate and undergraduate tutors at the CSTW Writing Center assist thousands of Ohio State writers each year. The Writing Center works as an academic support unit for the university to help clients with many kinds of writing: academic, business, and personal. We promote new ways of thinking about writing. Our unofficial motto, “All good writers need good readers,” demonstrates our commitment to help writers improve their writing process.

We encourage clients to approach writing with new flexibility, even though they may be working with fairly traditional writing assignments. For example, one of our largest client bases comes from Ohio State’s First-Year Composition program, whose curriculum includes such traditional assignments as the research paper. This reliance on traditional forms results in somewhat customary writing practices for students. Although some Ohio State students receive new media or digital assignments, few tutors could recall working with students on these. Moreover, most students maintained traditional difficulties with organization, structure, and the ever-popular grammar.

If, as we anticipate, students across the university are being asked to create presentations, reports, portfolios, or websites that contain mediated content (visuals, audio, video, 2D and 3D models, animations, data visualizations, etc.), should Ohio State be intentional about providing support for that work? If so, this opens new potential areas for CSTW to collaborate with other departments such as the Department of English’s Digital Media Project, the Department of Art’s Art and Technology and Design programs, and the OCIO’s Digital Union.

Questions for conversation:

In your discipline, are there new genres for student writing?

Would you be willing to talk with Writing Center staff about the typical writing expectations in your department?
The CTC program trains Ohio State undergraduates to provide support for teachers who are integrating technologies into their teaching. The focus is to improve teachers’ technology literacy as they begin to utilize the technologies in their classrooms. To better prepare our undergraduates and to address questions about the changing nature of writing, our team gathered data from three sources: our recent survey, *Technology Use for Teaching at The Ohio State University*, our collection of teachers’ technology support requests; and observations of our staff.

The survey revealed that the majority of CTC clients are concerned about using basic online systems and software for teaching and production: Carmen, PowerPoint, MS Word. 87% of respondents to our survey think these technologies are very or extremely important to their classes. Those respondents not requesting assistance with those three programs are moving or would like to move into one of several areas. They would like to assign media work by integrating image, video, and audio into composition assignments. They would like to utilize online applications, such as interactive web spaces, particularly social media networks, and they would like to include in their curriculum online sites that marry media and interactivity, such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Flickr.

The range of systems, technologies, and software for which people request support and that they hope to use soon is growing and includes the following in no particular order: Google suite, Google Earth & Sketchup, Zotero, Prezi, Camtasia, Smart boards, Second Life, iPads and eBooks, Adobe Connect, Final Cut, and iWorks.

We find that some instructors are looking to develop innovative ways for students to communicate knowledge in their disciplines, and to compose in media other than print. Not surprisingly, digital communication and interaction are becoming an assumed quantity across the university. The complexity of using any or all these systems effectively may be partially responsible for an increase in the number of requests we’ve had for in-class undergraduate consultants who work with teachers throughout the term, especially during intense technology-use periods.

These trends indicate that 21st-century writing will be created and distributed largely online. It is likely that writing will become intensely collaborative and heavily mediated. The expectations of quality are still high, but those high expectations are likely to be applied to more than the alphabetic (text) portion of the communicative experience. They will be applied to the visual, aural, and interactive components as well.

*Question for conversation:*

What online systems are most likely to influence your teaching in the future?
The Digital Media and Writing program provides resources for OSU students, staff, and faculty to help develop new media skills. The program produces Writers Talk, an interview series with writers across disciplines, which appears on YouTube, three television channels, and two Columbus radio stations. As such, the program is the public face of the CSTW and the voice of writers of all genres discussing their craft.

The work of this program has resulted in a library of more than a hundred authors from a dazzling array of fields reflecting on the act of writing. More and more frequently, they discuss new media and the changing aspects of writing they are experiencing. In addition, the students who produce Writers Talk write for a variety of media themselves, including YouTube, Facebook, blogs, and Twitter.

Writers Talk solicits advice from new media practitioners: Ohio State social media experts Ryan Squire, Debra Jasper, and Shaun Holloway; Internet authorities like Grammar Girl; YouTube stars like John Green; Boing Boing blog editor Mark Frauenfelder; and many others.

These interviews and the students’ experiences highlight the importance of Internet communication and raise the question, “What is being done at the university to prepare students to enter a rapidly changing media landscape?”

**Question for conversation:**

What resources should a university provide students to prepare them for a rapidly changing media landscape?
Our Community Outreach program partners with several sites in the Columbus City Schools District, with adult literacy agencies, and with local libraries. The staff and volunteer tutors from Ohio State help elementary, high school, and adult learners with their reading, writing, and speaking skills in creative, intense, literacy-based workshops.

For many reasons (new national curriculum standards and an emphasis on standardized testing, for example), some K-12 learning environments cannot always facilitate sustained reading, writing, research, and speaking experiences. Therefore, it is the Outreach program’s goal to provide these sustained interactions.

We believe our young students and adults — all potential university attendees — can become the best writers they can be even when they are sometimes defiantly witty, when they lack the confidence to fully engage with our literacy support team, or when they are reluctant to embrace the trials and difficulties of an extended writing process.

We address our writing clients’ needs by being flexible. We bring flavor and flair to the reading, writing, and speaking tasks we design. For example, over the last year we have frequently rewritten our planned curriculum to make it accessible for all of our K-12 students and adults, meeting and challenging students individually.

From our perspective, there are two things that have not changed about writing within the greater Columbus community: first, there is a need for supplemental K-12 literacy programming and support, and second, students are genuinely open to creative and useful writing experiences if the purpose for that writing is clear, engaging, and enjoyable. We strive to develop curriculum that is creative, fun, and in many ways forward looking. We hope clients will see an intrinsic and quantifiable value in activities from which they have historically abstained.

**Question for conversation:**
From your perspective, what useful or challenging characteristics do entering students have with regard to writing?
The WAC program supports teachers throughout Ohio State who use writing in their classrooms. This support includes workshops on how to use writing to enhance student learning in any discipline, reading groups for instructors of second-level writing, and one-on-one instructor training to develop innovative assignments, classroom activities, and curricula. We strive to give writing teachers from across the university an opportunity to learn from one another’s challenges and triumphs.

Through its engagement with instructors, WAC is uniquely positioned to hear instructors’ struggles with the complexities of writing in contemporary classrooms. First, we hear that students come to classes with diverse cultural and educational backgrounds; this both potentially enhances the classroom and presents pedagogical challenges. Many students enter second-level writing without taking English 1110 (First-Year Composition), either because they transferred credit from another institution or tested out of the course. Even if students do take English 1110 at Ohio State, many university writing instructors, most of whom teach outside the Department of English, have little familiarity with the First-Year Writing Program’s curriculum and are unsure how to build on students’ knowledge to achieve common learning goals. Additionally, an increasing number of international students attend Ohio State, and instructors often feel unprepared to offer them effective support and to make learning accessible to all students.

Furthermore, instructors increasingly want to engage their students beyond the classroom: anthropologists asking students to ethically frame ethnographic research on vulnerable societies for undergraduates like themselves; biologists teaching students to articulate public policy based on sound research; environment and natural resource instructors encouraging students to do research and make proposals to local decision makers to help their communities become more ecologically sustainable.

The traditional expository term paper does not necessarily provide adequate preparation for students to think and write dynamically in such varied contexts. In response, instructors across the disciplines are redefining the genres and audiences for which students write. Furthermore, through innovative research and pedagogy, instructors are providing ways for students to consider how technology affects the production, distribution, and evaluation of knowledge. These challenges present a critical opportunity for all of us, WAC included, to articulate the significance of emerging writing practices and instruction in higher education today.

**Question for conversation:**
- How can teachers use writing to engage students’ learning across the curriculum?
- How can teachers engage students with wider publics using innovative forms of writing and digital composition?
The complexity of writing and the need to better understand that complexity are reflected in the writing projects that the CSTW has sponsored over the past several years. These projects have included dissertations, an interdisciplinary community media project, and the upcoming *Writing Matters in a Changing World* conference at Ohio State.

It is clear that one of the most pressing issues in contemporary writing instruction centers on the experiences of English language learners (ELL). A focus on special populations dominated the supported dissertation topics for the last two years. Most prominent are studies on the experience of English language learners (ELL) as they move through universities, write dissertations, and try to publish scholarly work (representing three separate dissertations).

As the university seeks to globalize its curriculum, it must also address the needs of ELL writers. The Ohio State Office of Research has reached out to the CSTW in efforts to set up systematic support for these young researchers’ writing and publishing efforts. For many of these young scholars, English is a second, third, or fourth language. Though the program has yet to be funded, issues persist and require study.

Through our research projects, we hope to help identify persistent areas of need for ELL students and the faculty and staff who work with them.

*Questions for conversation:*

- What special student populations are you finding in your discipline?
- What type of writing research would explore the needs of these populations?
CLOSING STATEMENT

We recognize that these are the kinds of issues and questions that cannot be addressed thoughtfully by one center, one program, or even one institution. Please help us by making suggestions, asking questions, or providing online comments in response to these very brief statements.

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Communication Technology Consultants (CTC)
The CTC program connects Ohio State faculty, staff, and graduate students with skilled undergraduate consultants who provide one-on-one assistance with integrating technology into academic work. Unlike general technology support staff, CTC consultants help with a specific project, with the goal of helping the client become a more proficient and autonomous user of technology.

Community Outreach
The outreach program sends experienced and passionate outreach consultants into Columbus City Schools and literacy-focused agencies to introduce students to new concepts, create skill sets necessary for success in the post-secondary world, and hone their oral, written, and digital literacy proficiencies. Our partners — young students, teachers, and researchers — create opportunities for networking, collaboration, and scholarship.

Digital Media and Writing
The digital media and writing program tackles the challenges and opportunities of new means of production by encouraging student, staff, and faculty engagement with digital media. The most significant part of this program is the weekly production of Writers Talk shows, available on radio, television, and Internet broadcasts.

Minor in Professional Writing
The Minor in Professional Writing supports students from all areas of university study who are interested in writing in the various worlds of work. In partnership with more than 125 Columbus area businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies, the minor helps students become reflective and articulate writers who contribute to the ever-changing needs of contemporary workplaces.

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC)
The WAC program supports teachers throughout Ohio State who use writing in their teaching, collaborating with them to develop innovative approaches for writing instruction. The program connects Ohio State’s best teachers to discuss emerging challenges and opportunities in 21st-century communication, to investigate best practices in the classroom, and to share research on how writing can be a powerful tool for teaching and learning.

The Writing Center
The Writing Center provides free help with writing at any stage of the writing process for any member of the university community. Writing Center tutors are graduate and undergraduate students from a variety of academic disciplines, all trained in teaching writing. Tutorials include assistance with research papers, lab reports, dissertations, résumés, proposals, and application materials. The writing center is an educational space for everyone involved.