

# 10

## MENTORING IN ELECTRONIC SPACES

### *Using Resources to Sustain Relationships*

JAMES A. INMAN

DONNA N. SEWELL

Electronic media influence more and more of contemporary writing center theory and practice, whether offering new tutoring options, stimulating outreach and other professional connections, or providing new genres and forms for scholarship. Books like *Wiring the Writing Center* (Hobson 1998) and *Taking Flight with OWLs: Examining Electronic Writing Center Work* (Inman and Sewell 2002) have identified specific aspects of electronic media's influence, as has the CD-ROM *The OWL Construction and Maintenance Guide* (Inman and Gardner 2002). Leading journals like *Writing Center Journal*, *Writing Lab Newsletter*, *Computers and Composition*, and *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* (<http://english.ttu.edu/kairos>) have also featured publications about the increasing influence of electronic media on writing center theory and practice.

Electronic media enable writing center professionals to stay connected to each other. Such interactive media as electronic mail (email), electronic lists (e-lists), and MOOs have enabled several important forums.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps most prominent is WCenter, an e-list created by Lady Falls Brown and Fred Kemp at Texas Tech University and now moderated and maintained solely by Brown.<sup>2</sup> In operation since 1991, it provides a popular discussion forum for writing center professionals, and its active participant base includes many prominent individuals in the writing center community, all of whom contribute regularly. Reflecting this popularity, as well as the importance of the e-list as a forum for professional exchange, citation of WCenter posts has been evident for some time in publications (Brown 2000; "Conversations"). Another important electronic forum is PeerCentered, created by Clinton Gardner in 1998.<sup>3</sup> Initially held mostly in The Virtual Writing Center (a

MOO at Salt Lake Community College), PeerCentered sessions enabled writing center professionals to discuss theoretical and practical issues in real time. Now, Gardner has shifted PeerCentered to an asynchronous blogging community, where individuals share ideas as their time allows. His choice reflects not just the changing nature of technology options, but also the material conditions around writing center work; professionals struggled to commit to a specific time every week, so the asynchronous format has proven more popular. Both forums, WCenter and PeerCentered, help us consider the possibilities of electronic media for connecting writing center professionals in new and important ways.

The issue is more than opportunity, however. Contemporary writing center theory and practice compel us to learn about how to connect with other professionals as effectively as possible through electronic media. After all, the writing center community has now become global, with the relatively recent change of the National Writing Centers Association to the International Writing Centers Association, as well as the emergence of the European Writing Centers Association and new initiatives in such countries as South Africa. Budgets simply do not allow everyone to travel globally and to connect with each other in person, but we can utilize electronic media to reach out, and we need to do more of this sort of work. If we are truly an international organization, then the same support systems and professional initiatives that are available in national contexts should be available around the world, including opportunities for writing center professionals to sustain each other in ways like mentoring. New and veteran writing center professionals need each other's support and guidance, but we cannot just magically begin this work. We also need training—detailed knowledge about how to mentor across great distances by using resources like electronic media. Thus far, the writing center community has simply done what it can, and the results have been useful, but we need to know and do much more.

We begin below with a definition of *mentoring*, followed by a corresponding definition of *electronic mentoring*. We then apply this definition to WCenter practices, using the resulting knowledge to craft recommendations for future mentoring practices. We study the past and the present in this chapter to present information valuable for the future. For too long now, writing center professionals have had limited or no guidance about how to utilize electronic media effectively in reaching out to

colleagues for purposes like mentoring. This chapter fills that gap and, we hope, meets the compelling need for such specific guidance. In so doing, we hope it becomes part of a roadmap for the future success of the writing center community—a truly global writing center community, where electronic media help us span great distances to work closely together and guide each other to professional success.

#### DEFINING ELECTRONIC MENTORING

Mentoring is a contested term. Simultaneously, it suggests identifying an earnest commitment to the development of colleagues, and imposing values onto those colleagues. This section surveys definitions and implications of mentoring before offering our own definition of electronic mentoring.

Mentoring has been defined as a form of teaching. The idea of mentoring appears in Homer's *Odyssey*, which includes a half-God, half-man figure named Mentor, who guides Telemachus. In the American colonial period, mentoring linked to apprenticeship. Learners sought out "masters" of a skill or trade and then worked under them, eventually becoming masters themselves, forging ahead on their own. Recent discussions of mentoring have constructed mentors as professional guides, helping protégés develop and follow maps to professional success. Theresa Enos and Richard C. Gebhardt both wrote chapters on mentoring in *Academic Advancement in Composition Studies: Scholarship, Publication, Promotion, Tenure* (Gebhardt and Gebhardt 1997), with Gebhardt's chapter in particular emphasizing that administrators must foster mentoring relationships. Likewise, several essays in Gary A. Olson and Todd W. Taylor's *Publishing in Rhetoric and Composition* (1997) explore the way publication can operate in a mentoring fashion, in which experienced writers develop collaborative relationships with less-experienced writers and develop projects together.

Critics of mentoring have identified potentially problematic elements of mentoring relationships. In the *Odyssey* example cited above, the idea that Mentor is half-God clearly suggests his superiority over those humans with whom he worked. The American colonial "master" model demonstrates the same hierarchical relationship. In the Olson and Taylor collection (1997), Janice Lauer critiques traditional, hierarchical mentoring, wondering why graduate students cannot extend that role and become mentors themselves, or why more genuinely collaborative

relationships are not imagined between mentor and protégé. Such reality goes directly to voice (who gets to speak as a mentor) and to authority (whose voice counts and why). Indeed, mentoring can perpetuate injustice and oppression instead of empowerment.

Considerations of “electronic mentoring” have attracted attention both to the way mentoring has been defined traditionally and its potential to be problematic for mentor and protégé alike. Discussions about electronic mentoring occurred during the first “Town Hall” forum at the 2000 Computers and Writing conference in Fort Worth, Texas; the theme for the forum was “Graduate Student(s) Matter(s)!” Ten scholars presented position statements, all published together in issue 5.2 of *Kairos*. Rebecca Rickly (2000) cites work by Theresa Enos to identify the social realities of mentoring in the academy: “Mentoring, in practice, grows out of a master/apprentice model, a model that invokes patriarchal and hierarchical power issues. Such a model indeed fits nicely into an academic institution, with its stratified power structures and hierarchical organization.” Bill Condon (2000) suggests, however, that different opportunities exist for those working with electronic media, adding also a layer of responsibility for those who have been mentored to become mentors themselves:

I’m arguing that those of us already active in the field have a duty to cheer on those just entering it. As we fulfill that duty, we almost instantly create new colleagues whose work helps ease our paths at the same time as we ease theirs. I’m also arguing that in other fields, graduate students represent the future of the field; in ours, graduate students have always represented the present as well—starting with a graduate student named Hugh Burns, whose dissertation about computer-assisted Topoi basically founded the field.

Condon’s (2000) and Rickly’s (2000) perspectives represent a sensible take on the nature of mentoring. Condon is right that electronic media sometimes change the equation—perhaps not completely redefining the hierarchical social system associated typically with mentoring in the academy, but at least opening spaces wherein those who would otherwise be protégés by default (graduate students, for instance) can become mentors themselves. Yet Rickly is right that we need to remember at all times the problematic potential of mentoring relationships, asking ourselves who leads and why, and thinking together about redefining mentoring to reflect less innate hierarchy.

Rickly's, Condon's, and indeed all perspectives on electronic mentoring prove relative to the access conditions associated with the electronic media utilized in any mentoring interaction. That is, because access conditions are never equal and rarely equitable, mentoring interactions are necessarily never technologically equal themselves. The difference may be as seemingly straightforward as that in which one participant in a mentoring interaction has a new computer and broadband Internet access, while another participant has an older computer and dial-in access. However, as scholars like Cynthia L. Selfe and Charles Moran have noted in a series of publications, matters may also be more complex. Neighborhoods, particularly in inner-city and rural environments, do not always have the telecommunications infrastructure needed; in fact, a number of neighborhoods in the United States do not have phone service, a reality that often surprises individuals accustomed to positive access conditions. Globally, access problems are amplified as third-world nations in particular do not often possess a strong telecommunications infrastructure. Simply put, access must be addressed in any careful and responsible examination of electronic mentoring, because it's important not just who's able to participate actively, but also who's limited and who's unable to participate at all.

In crafting our own definition of "electronic mentoring" for this chapter, we take our cue from scholars like Rickly and Condon, attempting to keep the positive possibilities of mentoring relationships without losing sight of their problematic implications. We also remember to keep the material conditions around such mentoring practices strongly in mind. Thus, we ultimately define electronic mentors for the writing center community as online colleagues who collaborate with others, successfully meeting the material challenges around and between them, to help these colleagues see both themselves and their evolving professional identities, as well as the broader profession around them. Electronic mentors may be seasoned writing center faculty, staff, and administrators, but they may also be students, colleagues in industry, and others with important experiences and ideas to share. Correspondingly, we define electronic mentoring in the following way: offering responsible professional support and guidance to colleagues across institutional positions and contexts through the use of electronic media, working proactively to mediate challenging material conditions around the use of these media. We invite readers to imagine electronic mentoring as a truly global endeavor, and to see such work as innately

valuable for the emerging global writing center community, connecting all of us in new and important ways that are sure to further the community's future.

#### WCENTER: AN ELECTRONIC WRITING CENTER COMMUNITY

Building on the definition of electronic mentoring above, and our earlier discussion of the writing center community's compelling need for knowledge about how it is best done, we now look specifically at WCenter, the e-list maintained by Brown. We focus on the attention WCenter has received as an important electronic forum for forging connections among writing center professionals, then provide results from a survey of subscribers we conducted, as well as a case study of WCenter interaction.

WCenter functions as a wonderful resource for writing center professionals,<sup>4</sup> in part because of the people who subscribe. Theresa Ammirati (2000) posts to WCenter a specific example of how Muriel Harris became her mentor when Ammirati began creating a writing center at her institution:

She sent me materials, answered my panicky questions over the phone, lent tremendous moral and physical support—so that even twenty years (and two other directors in the last five years) later, I see the results of her professional and personal kindness and concern in our very successful operation. Through the years, having actually met Mickey in person only once or twice, I think of her as a mentor and a support, in short, an exemplar.

Harris generously invested time and effort into helping Ammirati. Also, most of this mentoring occurred at a distance. While telephone and postal mail served as the primary means of mentoring in this instance, technology such as WCenter can increase the possibilities of such support. Ammirati's anecdote, then, provides a perspective on long-distance mentoring as we look at WCenter's potential.

WCenter first received a great deal of scholarly attention at a panel for the 1998 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Chicago, Illinois. Lady Falls Brown posted a summary of that session ("Session H.17") to WCenter on April 7, 1998. Brown states that she focused on the history of WCenter, Bobbie Silk analyzed the way WCenter discourages dissent, Paula Gillespie examined WCenter's use as a research tool, Jeanne Simpson explored WCenter's role in her life and her role as advisor to members with questions about administration,

Stephen Newmann wondered whether WCenter should count as professional activity, Jo Koster Tarvers suggested research on the typical newbie experience, and Muriel Harris explored reasons people lurk. Our chapter focuses on an important question Brown notes as being from Jeanne Simpson: “How can the mentoring role on WCenter be sustained and protected?” We also consider what counts as sound electronic mentoring, and ponder the potentially problematic implications mentoring might bring. In other words, does WCenter support electronic mentoring? If so, how? If not, why not? Which practices should continue, and which should be re-examined?

Part of what allows for the possibility of electronic mentoring is the welcoming and generous ethos of WCenter, described in a post by Simone Gers (1998): “I enjoy the friendly banter and camaraderie. These aspects of the list suggest to this neophyte that the group is friendly and open to new voices.” Paula Gillespie (2002) claims a connection between WCenter’s atmosphere and its creation of a community:

As I look over the earliest logs of WCenter in the archives, I’m struck by the clowning, the fellowship, the good-natured community established there, and indeed these qualities are the reasons that many busy administrators do *not* subscribe: it’s too much for some people, and they tell us so as they unsubscribe. But in that clowning, there is a sense of community-building that makes it easy to contribute, easy to ask and sometimes answer questions. (41)

An initial attempt, then, to answer Simpson’s question suggests that WCenter continue to create a friendly environment, open to newcomers, free for the most part from the crankiness sometimes found on other academic e-lists. The sense of community that develops out of that friendliness keeps people returning to WCenter. Without such an ethos, mentoring relationships may not develop.

### *Survey Responses*

To determine further how members of WCenter understand electronic mentoring, Inman (2001) posted a questionnaire to the list. He wanted to obtain specific commentary about such mentoring beyond the sorts of regular-posting list messages we cited above. Only seven participants responded to this questionnaire initially, so Inman randomly sampled WCenter subscribers who had posted to the list in 2001 in

order to gather email addresses; he then reposted the questionnaire to those fifty-two participants. Fourteen of the fifty-two recipients responded from twelve states and the District of Columbia.<sup>5</sup> These participants represent private and public institutions; liberal arts colleges, community colleges, comprehensive colleges, and research I institutions; religiously affiliated institutions and corporate educational institutions. It's fair to say, then, that the participants also represent a host of different access conditions, including both high-tech and low-tech hardware and software, cable and dial-in Internet connectivity, and more. The WCenter posts cited in this section are specific responses to the survey Inman conducted.

Most respondents accept that informal mentoring occurs online via the many requests for help and advice that occurs in this electronic environment. A writing center director may post a question about staffing a center, preparing annual reports, or using faculty notification forms, and within a few days the director may receive public responses to the post in addition to responses sent via private email. This kind of exchange sets up WCenter as an information resource. Lauren Fitzgerald (2001) suggests that the advice alone can move toward mentoring: "I see lots of advice, and some of that advice seems to gel into a kind of mentoring for its recipients, particularly when everyone responding to the original post refers to the sender by name, really talks to him/her, and addresses his/her problem specifically." While cautious about labeling this practice *mentoring* because of its transitory nature, this type of exchange creates a sense of community, reassuring the poster that others share his or her concerns. Gillespie (2002) compares WCenter to other academic forums:

It can sound like a conference session with a good give and take, but it has two unique qualities: Those who need to know can determine the shape the discussion will take, because there is no need to mask insecurity behind a show of professionalism. We can say, "We are just starting out and need help." Imagine saying that at a CCCC session. The WCenter session can be more attuned to audience and purpose than a conference session, because the audience will speak up and make its needs known.<sup>6</sup>

Those participants who receive public responses sometimes receive the kind of detailed and personal responses that, at least, border on electronic mentoring despite the temporary nature of the relationship.



WCenter also functions as more than an information resource. In his response to the survey, Kurt Bouman (2001) notes that he has engaged in “backchannel conversations” about his work: “This mentoring has been important in keeping me professionally focused and involved, and it makes me feel like a more full and/or substantial member of the comp/rhet community.” Lauren Fitzgerald (2001) reports similar experiences to Bouman and values the informal and formal mentoring: “A couple of people took me aside, in offlist discussions, to help me out individually.” WCenter creates a potential for electronic mentoring, even when that mentoring does not occur publicly. Those participants who post for advice sometimes receive more sustained career guidance and support delivered through personal email. Without WCenter, though, such opportunities for interaction would be much more limited.

In her response, Katie Fischer (2001) notes the way her own relationship to WCenter members has changed. Originally, she looked for mentors on WCenter, but now she views its participants more as colleagues. Fischer’s response indicates a growth in expertise that occurs with time in the field. This changing relationship is apparent in the responses of others as well; Mary Wislocki (2001) states, “Mentoring is an idea that I’m trying to grow into in as many ways as I can.” Wislocki’s response reminds us of the responsibility involved in helping others, the need to support the WCenter community by assisting those who request assistance.

Aware of the problematic implications of mentoring, Dean Hinnen (2001) notes that “mentoring” isn’t quite the right word for what happens on WCenter as “the exchanges have tended to be more ‘conversations of equals’ than mentoring, per se.” Hinnen explains his perspective more fully:

I do think a certain amount of “mentoring” takes place on lists such as WCenter and WPA-L. However, even the more knowledgeable potential “mentors” on these lists usually refrain from adopting rhetorical positions as “mentors,” and instead project an “ethos of equality,” as it were, in their mentoring role. It seems to me that the breaking down of the mentor/protégé relationship, which seems to occur naturally on these lists, makes it easier for novices to seek advice. This mentoring in public spaces does, however, require more subtlety than the traditional mentor/protégé role in a face-to-face environment.

Sabrina Peters-Whitehead (2001) also focuses on the “collaborative, non-hierarchical mentoring experience” of WCenter “in which all members of WCenter mentor each other without any designation of certain people being the mentors and others being the ‘mentees.’” WCenter, then, manages to provide electronic mentoring to subscribers in a relatively egalitarian manner, allowing those with questions to ask them and those with responses to post them. While members may become authorities in certain areas (such as Jeanne Simpson’s expertise on upper-level administration), any member may respond to anyone’s post. Because we do not have any better terminology for this collegial mentoring, we continue to use the term *mentoring* for now, despite agreeing with Hinnen (2001) about the practice of mentoring on WCenter.

Jo Koster’s (2001) response suggests new directions for WCenter based on her experience on the Chaucer list: “The Chaucer MetaPage at UNC-CH . . . has some ‘Chaucer Meta-Mentors’—three experienced scholars who have agreed to two-year terms as online mentors, and visitors to the page can email the mentors directly with specific questions. . . . I wonder again if we couldn’t set something like this up.” While this suggestion may look like a movement away from the current egalitarian nature of the list, we think it deserves careful consideration. Having designated electronic mentors should not subtract from the daily questions, responses, and discussions that keep the e-list busy. Instead, it may allow for more sustained and in-depth electronic mentoring that is not as common currently via email or e-list.

### *Case Study*

To bring this discussion into specific relief, we turn to one WCenter thread that began on January 17, 2003, when Lauren Fitzgerald posted a question about whether or not faculty tutors should work with their own students in the writing center. This post kicked off a thread, in which twenty-one speakers posted thirty-four messages. This thread began on a Friday, making the response even more amazing, since many WCenter subscribers anticipated a long weekend with the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday approaching.

This topic resonated with WCenter members, prompting a flurry of posts examining varied angles. While initial responses talked directly to Fitzgerald, soon posters moved beyond a discussion of her particular situation and the wording of a policy for her writing center into a discus-

sion of the assumptions undergirding positions for and against tutoring one's own students. Eleven of the respondents explicitly or implicitly agreed with Fitzgerald's policy against working with one's own students, two disagreed, and seven took no stand. The numbers provide context for the discussion, but the discussion, not the numbers, intrigues us. This section examines public interaction on WCenter to see how it relates to the notion of electronic mentoring.

Although direct responses suggest the establishment of a relationship between two individuals, failure to name the original poster doesn't indicate lack of concern in the question. Instead, later respondents focus on follow-up posts. W. Gary Griswold (2003) writes, "For me it seems simple (though of course there may [be] complexities I don't know about): if the faculty work with their own students during their time in the writing center, they are doing what should be done during their office hours, and thus are essentially being paid twice for the same thing." Greg Dyer (2003) responds to Griswold's post, noting that the context of his center means tutors aren't being paid twice because they volunteer. Both Griswold and Dyer stay close to the issues raised by Fitzgerald, even though Dyer never mentions Fitzgerald in his post. Fitzgerald and many other readers still benefit from this discussion. Does the benefit rise to the level of electronic mentoring? Perhaps not, but the resource of WCenter allows for the potential of mentoring.

We need research into long-term mentoring relationships conducted mainly via electronic resources, but gathering such data proves difficult. Although we don't have the email and transcripts to document other cases, both authors of this chapter have participated in online mentoring. Donna Sewell began attending Tuesday Café, gaining several online mentors, most notably Tari Fanderclai and Sharon Cogdill. While Sewell learned a great deal about incorporating synchronous computer technology into her classes, relationships developed, rather than simply resources. Those relationships began completely online and, like many mentoring relationships, moved beyond their initial purpose (helping Sewell teach in an electronic environment) into professional career advice, discussions of promotion and tenure, and friendship. We call for more research into this area, for long-term data collection into mentoring relationships that occur mostly online. Such research has begun with teacher apprentices, with students teaching while being mentored at a distance by university professors, but we want to know about relationships that begin through electronic lists of varied kinds.

## FOR THE FUTURE: RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the global and increasingly high-tech ethos of the contemporary writing center community, electronic media provide valuable options, like WCenter and PeerCentered, for supporting relationships that help us improve as professionals. Our research indicates that though members of the writing center community have been doing some effective electronic mentoring thus far, we can all improve, bringing more of our professional energy to this important activity. We conclude this chapter with specific recommendations for doing just that.

We recommend the following actions to support the continued emergence of effective electronic mentoring practices:

- Electronic mentors and mentees should learn about technology access conditions in their institutional and organizational contexts, and develop detailed agreements for acknowledging and proactively addressing any possible access complications.
- Electronic mentors and mentees should learn about the general institutional and organizational contexts associated with their professional lives, so conversations can focus on the specific needs of each individual in the mentoring relationship, rather than relying on generalities.
- Electronic mentors and mentees should have experience with and be able to employ a range of electronic media in support of their electronic mentoring relationship, and they should interact both within and outside of electronic communities, like WCenter and PeerCentered.
- Electronic mentors and mentees should understand the vulnerability that is innately a component of every mentoring relationship, and strive to maintain an “ethos of equality” (Hinnen 2001), thinking about each other’s institutional and organizational positions, as well as each other’s professional identities.
- Electronic mentors and mentees should serve as professional advocates for more support for such relationships, working to secure formal recognition of the importance of these relationships in institutional and organizational contexts, as well as in professional organizations.

Emerging from our research, these recommendations serve as a foundation for electronic mentoring in contemporary writing center theory and practice.

In true writing center spirit, we close with an invitation for conversation. That is, we’ve learned a great deal about electronic mentoring and

its vital role in the future of the writing center community through our research, but we realize that there's much more to learn, and we hope you'll join us in that pursuit. We invite you specifically to conduct your own studies, sharing best practices and mentoring strategies with everyone, so that we can all grow and become the best electronic mentors we can be. Today's global and increasingly high-tech writing center community compels our most determined efforts.