

From In-Class to Online: Developing Asynchronous and Hybrid Writing Center Workshops

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During my first year as the associate director of the writing center at Salisbury University, a mid-size regional comprehensive university, I had developed an in-class workshop program that was growing exponentially when the COVID-19 pandemic closed the campus in mid-March 2020. These workshops are part of the regular services provided by the writing center to support both faculty and students across campus, at all levels, through a WAC/WID model. The writing center had already scheduled several in-class workshops for late March and April that covered material still needed for students to complete course assignments such as literature reviews and research papers. In order to meet the needs of faculty and students, I developed asynchronous and hybrid workshops that would allow some flexibility of instruction while also making room for student interaction. In this article, I will discuss how I developed and facilitated these online workshops, their affordances and constraints, and the assessment protocol that is underway to understand the effectiveness of online workshops. I will also connect this work to the need for continued research and discussion of how writing centers can expand their digital outreach for both students and faculty.



WRITING CENTERS, TECHNOLOGY, AND WORKSHOPS

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and universities all across the country moved to online education, writing centers were often left out of conversations in places like the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or the Writing Program Administrators' listserv about how to adapt pedagogies for the digital environments of students, staff, and faculty. These conversations posed the sudden digital innovations as new, ignoring the ways in which some writing centers have embraced online education models for decades. The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL), as well as other writing centers, have offered online writing support since the 1990s. Throughout the last two decades, scholars have described how writing centers can offer

carefully constructed online services (Hewett; Inman and Sewell). Tutor education has also incorporated information about effective online tutoring strategies to prepare tutors for tutoring online both synchronously and asynchronously as part of their regular duties (Gallagher and Maxfield). Writing center outreach, primarily in the form of workshop development, has increasingly been a focus of writing center administrators and scholars, including work on how to assess writing center workshop effectiveness (Wood, et al.) and how to train tutors to facilitate workshops (Crews and Garahan). Additionally, scholars in the field have made the call for us to consider new ways of providing outreach beyond traditional in-person tutoring, both to support possibly marginalized students (Salem) and to expand our conception of writing center work (Grutsch McKinney). However, there is a lack of published scholarship on how technology can be used to provide outreach to students and faculty beyond online tutoring or web resources. Therefore, when designing online workshops for my own writing center, I found very little scholarship I could directly pull from, so instead I had to find ways to merge information about effective digital pedagogical practices, workshop development, and accessibility. This article hopes to serve writing center administrators or tutors who want to develop online workshop models beyond synchronous formats, especially as writing centers will likely be forever changed by this temporary move to all-digital.

DEVELOPING ONLINE WORKSHOPS: ASYNCHRONOUS AND HYBRID MODELS

In developing “in-class” online workshops, my foremost concern was that they meet student and instructor needs *and* be as accessible as possible. Traditionally, our writing center works with any course instructor to develop a workshop that is specific to a current assignment or unit so that students can immediately put the material into practice. Developing online workshops did not change this practice but it did change the delivery of material significantly. In particular, there was a renewed focus on how to make the delivery the most accessible for students, particularly considering our university’s population, which includes many working-class students without access to updated technology and rural students with spotty internet (if they have internet at all). For some workshops, this accessibility issue ruled out using an online meeting platform such as Zoom, yet we still wanted an opportunity for students to ask questions, interact with each other, and get feedback in a timely manner. Therefore, we decided to use an asynchronous format that could be incorporated in the university’s learning management system (LMS). In other circumstances, it was possible to have a recorded lecture-style component and a live component using

Zoom because of a lower number of students in the group or class or because the students lived off-campus where they had access to internet at home or through the university's parking lot "hot spots."

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Accessibility considerations go beyond just the delivery format, however. Our writing center has an inclusivity statement on our website that we work hard to incorporate into all of our services, and because we acknowledge the importance of universal design principles in writing center work (Kiedaisch and Dinitz), I wanted to make sure workshops were meeting accessibility requirements that considered learning differences, disabilities, and access to technology. Therefore, I needed to ensure our technology included captions for the recorded portions, working links for shared resources, and some clear alternatives in case technology failed on my or students' ends. Additionally, unlike a synchronous workshop where we could easily integrate an activity or peer review into the workshop, asynchronous workshops did not allow for that same kind of engagement. As a result, we needed to create clear channels for students to practice what they learned. And while we always included information about making an appointment, finding resources, or contacting the center, we spent more time at the end of workshops showing students how to do this through the use of screen capture. Essentially, the goal was to provide the most help with the resources we had available while also not placing a burden on students dealing with accessibility issues ranging from disabilities to hardware technology deficits or lack of software programs. We also wanted to account for the ability of students to process new material during a time of incredible stress, grief from loss of loved ones, and, in some cases, trauma from being sent "home" in the middle of a pandemic. Keeping these issues of access in mind, I developed asynchronous and hybrid workshop models.

ASYNCHRONOUS WORKSHOP MODEL

Asynchronous workshops were designed for courses that previously had an asynchronous format or an online component. The first part of the asynchronous workshop utilized ten- to twenty-minute video lectures using relevant and course-specific information and examples. Using the Panopto platform for making video lectures, I delivered the workshop material through a recorded and narrated PowerPoint video, which the instructors then added to their chosen LMS course modules.

The second part of the workshop utilized discussion boards for students to engage with each other and with me about the material. The instructors added me to their LMS course sites so that I could

create the discussion prompts and monitor student engagement. Students were required to respond to each other's posts so that they could demonstrate their own knowledge and provide useful examples; I then went into those discussion boards and answered any questions or concerns students had. Having these discussions be open to the entire class made the material more interactive, which is a key pedagogical practice in workshops. Rather than passively watching video lectures, students were invited to develop questions or ask for points of clarification, then demonstrate their own knowledge in an open forum. While this engagement was fruitful for students, it was also time-intensive. I discuss the labor and time involved in online workshops later, but I want to note the importance of accounting for this time when deciding how to incorporate discussion elements into asynchronous workshops.

HYBRID WORKSHOP MODEL

One of the online workshops met a very specific request from our undergraduate research journal's editorial staff. The journal had just hired a new team of student editors and asked if the writing center could put together a workshop on basic editing skills and how to give effective feedback. Because this was a small group with specific needs, we decided some portion of synchronous interaction was appropriate. The workshop material was given via recorded video, which the student editors watched on their own; then, in a one-hour Zoom meeting, I answered questions, provided clarity, and pointed to specific resources. This hybrid model saved time compared to the all-asynchronous model (see below) and allowed for more immediate interaction. However, it did require student access to technology, more concentrated coordination across multiple media (email, Zoom, Panopto), and reserved time to hold the meeting, making it less flexible for all involved compared to the asynchronous model.

ONLINE WORKSHOP MODELS: ALLOWANCES, CONSTRAINTS, AND CONSIDERATIONS

The best part of these online workshop models was how well they mirrored our in-person workshop pedagogy, which places emphasis on student engagement. These online workshops also made it easy to share resources. In the discussion forums, I could post links to resources such as the Purdue OWL or the library's style guides. I was also able to easily share links through the chat feature of Zoom for the hybrid workshop meeting. The asynchronous components of these workshops also prevented a common problem with in-class workshops: their one-off nature. Because students could watch and re-watch the video on their own time, they did not have to rely solely on their note-taking or sans-context slides to have the

information.

Unfortunately, there are some constraints with online workshops, particularly in terms of how we can measure student engagement. While the required discussion forum or online meetings ask students to engage with material, measuring student engagement can be difficult. As Jessa Wood, et al., among other scholars, have noted, workshops are not the best educational model for all students, and neither is online learning. It can be hard to measure students' understanding, and at times when I moderated discussions, they asked questions that were directly addressed in the pre-recorded lecture. Additionally, when I answered questions, students rarely responded to my comments, meaning they may have simply not read the answers or, if they still were unsure about the answer, might have felt they could not continue to ask for clarity.

Another problem with online workshops is the high labor input involved. The asynchronous model can be time-consuming, sometimes prohibitively so. While the creation of the workshop material required no more time than an in-person workshop, recording videos and making sure they were well-produced, edited, and captioned took additional time.² More importantly, facilitating and monitoring the discussion forums took significantly more time than I would have spent simply answering questions in the classroom or responding to a few follow-up emails. One asynchronous workshop was for a course with two sections of thirty students apiece, meaning I spent time reading and responding to sixty original discussion forum posts, as well as some additional student responder comments. While I had time to do this for the few online workshops offered, not everyone would be able to do so. In fact, had these online workshops been offered in the first half of the semester, when we often have three or more workshop requests a week, I would not have been able to dedicate this much time to each workshop. Writing center administrators should be protective of their time and labor, so the time issue is especially important to consider when offering new or altered programming. These aspects of time and labor are impacted by the context of centers and administrators, too. For example, as a tenure-track faculty member, I can add this work to my tenure file, whereas a staff or non-tenure track administrator may receive no recognition or be underpaid for this extra labor. These material factors are necessary aspects of designing programming. Additionally, tutors who take on this work should be fairly compensated for the total amount of time they put into the workshop—from development and recording of materials to the time spent responding to student questions.

Writing center administrators need to carefully consider the allowances and constraints of online workshops before developing online programming. These considerations include working with the instructors who request workshops so that they might understand the time and access issues involved, having a campus office that can help with the technological considerations (in our case, an instructional design and delivery office), and being conscious of the labor involved for both the workshop facilitator and the students. For those who train tutors to develop and deliver workshops, it is even more important to consider how these constraints might look different than they would for an administrator. A tutor, for example, would likely be even more hard-pressed for time and may not have familiarity with all the resources available. Therefore, if peer tutors are expected to do online workshops, additional training and introduction to campus technology resources are necessary. However, even with these constraints, it is worth pursuing these online workshop formats so that students who might otherwise not have access to writing center services can participate in programming. Additionally, these workshops serve as profound professional development opportunities for peer, graduate, and professional tutors.

ASSESSING ONLINE WORKSHOPS

At the time my writing center developed these online workshops, we were also in the process of developing an assessment plan for workshops. I developed two assessment instruments for both in-person and online workshops. Using Qualtrics software, I created evaluation forms for students and faculty to send immediately after a workshop's completion. The student evaluation forms serve not only as assessment tools for the writing center but are also designed to be a reflective tool for the students. Surveys ask about the helpfulness of the workshops and students' likelihood of using future writing center services. In addition, these evaluations include open-ended sections for students to reflect on what they learned and how they plan to integrate the workshop's content into their writing. The new evaluation forms also ask questions about the ease of accessing the workshop and its materials, with an open-ended component that allows students to provide feedback on how we can make workshops more accessible.

The faculty survey also serves two purposes. It asks about the workshops' meeting of goals and accessibility issues, but it also asks what other types of support or outreach faculty would like to help them integrate, teach, or assess writing in their courses or departments. Because our university's WAC program has recently become part of the writing center, this question helps us to under-

stand faculty needs, particularly as they relate to writing and technology. Developing assessments that target multiple problems and provide multiple paths for data analysis keeps the center from exhausting students and faculty with additional feedback requests while also providing space for reflection for these campus stakeholders. Additionally, having questions related to accessibility gives the writing center a chance to improve its technology usage and digital outreach efforts.

While these asynchronous and hybrid online workshops were offered as a “fix it” during the campus shutdown from COVID-19, our writing center has found them to be a good model for future programming. Online workshops provide services to students who often don’t visit the center, such as distance students, students enrolled in some of our programs at other institutions, or nontraditional students with busy home and work lives. While online workshops require careful considerations about access and labor, they also provide outlets for administrator innovation in how we collaborate with faculty. In our writing center, we hope these experiences will help us improve the accessibility and facilitation of our in-person workshops, too. The next step in my work is to assess our online workshops and compare the learning outcomes to in-person counterparts. Opening up the possibility of multimodal workshoping through the models I present here allows for new ways for writing centers to reach students, answering calls by leaders in the field such as Lori Salem and Jackie Grutsch McKinney to reconsider the ways in which we serve our student populations, particularly those who are underserved by our traditional focus on in-person outreach and programming.

NOTES

1. In Spring 2020, when everyone very suddenly, and with almost no infrastructural support, moved online, all of our requests were for asynchronous or hybrid workshops. Interestingly, in the 2020-21 academic year, we found an increase in requests for synchronous workshops, likely due to increased faculty comfort with technology, while also meeting new demands for static video content.

2. One benefit of these pre-recorded videos is the building of a video archive for common topics. For example, we created an annotated bibliography workshop video that can be reused for different courses and disciplinary contexts. The hope is that this archive will save us future time and labor.

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