



# Retooling the OWC: Offering Clients Online Platform Choices during a Pandemic

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Our two writing centers (WCs), like so many others, were thrown suddenly online by the pandemic in March 2020. Having been mostly face-to-face writing centers, and with mere days to make this major shift, we both adopted TwentySix Design LLC’s scheduling, online meeting, and document sharing platform, WOnline. We were not alone. TwentySix Design reported a 19,000 percent increase in use of its online module during the pandemic year (TwentySix Design LLC “UPDATE Online”). Without a doubt, TwentySix Design’s support staff were invaluable to our sudden jumps online. But when WOnline failed from time to time from March through August 2020, our consultants scrambled to find their own Plan Bs and Plan Cs.

Offering more than one online platform and document sharing tool during a stressful time might seem like a bad idea. New and unfamiliar technology tools can create barriers to access and comfort both for clients and consultants. But we saw in both our centers during the early pandemic that when consultants and clients pivoted to new technical options that they chose together, they were more comfortable, and they overcame technical glitches that interrupted sessions. Hoping to capture the benefits we saw in these informal practices, in Fall 2020, we implemented a formal consultant/client platform-choice model in both of our WCs. In this article we review our client survey data from Fall 2020—the first semester of our two-campus, IRB-approved study. We have many questions about our new model, which we are pursuing together. But we viewed Fall 2020 as our “Phase One Trial”—our initial limited data collection was not so much intended to prove that offering clients voluntary platform choices was effective and beneficial, as to confirm that it did not cause any harm through inaccessibility. As such, in this analysis, we address four questions:

- Did platform choices confuse clients or make them less



- comfortable?
- Did clients help choose platforms for their sessions?
- How often did tech problems delay or disrupt sessions?
- Which platforms did clients ideally prefer at each university?

### **BACKGROUND: TECH AS A BARRIER TO ACCESS**

Writing center theory has long focused on the need to apply flexibility when working through the rhetorical situation of the tutorial (Corbett). We argue that this idea applies not only to tutor-client interactions (Bourgeois and Giaimo) but also to platforms, modalities, and document sharing tools. Now that writing center practitioners largely accept the validity and importance of digital media tools in WC sessions (Grutsch McKinney, “New Media Matters”; Hewett et al.), and as more WCs add both asynchronous and synchronous online sessions, the field has begun more in-depth critical analysis of technical literacies as part of our everyday praxis (Bancroft).

Jessie Borgman and Casey McArdle are conflicted about adding new tech tools to online writing instruction systems. They argue for “a learning environment that is more inclusive” (36) and is “user-centered and user-driven” (37)—which suggests systems that offer clients and consultants agency to shape each writing session. But Borgman and McArdle also worry that remote learning already “creates enough barriers for students” (38). As such, they recommend against complex systems which require “too many clicks or links,” or make “the navigation of the CMS too complicated” (37). The “mediating” effects of platforms and tools also raise questions of power and privilege (Hewett; Prince et al.). As we developed protocols for platform choice in our centers, Borgman and McArdle’s words weighed heavily on our minds, and we were concerned that our new choice-based system would confuse students and tutors alike. The potential benefits of a choice-based system, however, outweighed these fears.

### **BACKGROUND: TWO DIFFERENT CENTERS, TWO DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONS**

Our two writing centers, one at William Paterson University (WPU) and the other at Centenary University (CU), are located about fifty miles apart in New Jersey. WPU is a public university designated as both a minority and Hispanic-serving institution with 8,600 undergraduate and 1,500 graduate students in 2019 (WPU). Traditionally a face-to-face (f2f) center, the WPU Writing Center (WPUWC) piloted synchronous online sessions during 2019 and made all sessions online optional in January 2020. But most clients still chose

f2f meetings until mid-March 2020 when WPU jumped fully online. In Fall 2020, the WPUWC remained fully online. The Writing Collaboratory at Centenary University is a less busy resource at a small campus of less than 1,800 students. CU is a small liberal arts college and a private, predominantly white institution located in rural New Jersey. The Writing Collaboratory offered exclusively f2f sessions until March 2020, when all campus activity was moved online. In Fall 2020, the Writing Collaboratory remained fully online.

## **OUR METHODS**

In August 2020, both WCs asked consultants to designate at least one digital meeting platform as an alternative to WOnline. We set no limits as to platform choices or using personal or institutional accounts. Almost all consultants chose only one alternative. At WPU, almost all chose Zoom, which was provided free to the entire campus. At CU, which did not pay for Zoom access for teachers or students, most consultants chose Microsoft Teams. We wanted to avoid confusion before consultants and clients began to talk together. So, we asked consultants to offer these alternatives to clients once they met within the WOnline platform prior to starting paper reviews. They also served as quick alternates if either a client or a consultant could not access WOnline for any reason before or during the session. In practice, some repeat clients and consultants soon began to jump straight to alternate platforms that they preferred.

Survey invitations were generated by WOnline automatically for each completed session at CU and upon completion of a consultant session report at WPU. Surveys began with three or four questions about general client satisfaction; these questions varied slightly between the two centers. Then the surveys asked five questions (identical at both centers) which address more specific questions of comfort, tech disruptions, agency, and alternate platform choices/preferences. We provide those five questions and results below. In Fall 2020, the WPUWC received 241 anonymous client surveys, representing 9.8% of 2466 total sessions. The Writing Collaboratory received 86 anonymous surveys, representing 23% of its 365 total sessions. As the surveys are anonymous and clients were offered new invitations for each session they completed, we do not know how often returning clients turned in multiple surveys.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Our Clients Were Very Comfortable with the Tech Choices We Offered**

We asked: “Were You Comfortable with the Way You Met Online? (Zoom, WOnline, Meet, Telephone. etc.?)” with five-choices of re-

sponses from “Very Comfortable” to “Very Uncomfortable.”<sup>1</sup> Of 327 total responses (WPU 218/CU 73), 291 replied they felt very comfortable, and 31 more were somewhat comfortable. Three were a little comfortable. Only two (out of 327) felt either somewhat or very uncomfortable. While these surveys represent only a fraction of actual sessions and clients, we saw almost no direct evidence of tech discomfort or confusion.

### Most Clients Said They Helped Choose Platforms

We asked clients: “Did you help choose how you met online for this session (Zoom, WOnline, Meet, etc.)?” The answer options were yes/somewhat/no. Most clients said yes: 70.1% at WPU and 84.9% at CU. Enough said no to concern us: 16.6% at WPU and 9.3% at CU. We believe that most tutors and clients collaborated on a crucial point of agenda-setting for sessions in a way that complements other collaborative practices central to WC pedagogy. But we see room for improvement.

### Clients Reported Few Session Delays or Tech Disruptions

After our chaotic experiences during spring 2020, we expected there would be a lot of tech glitches and disruptions in the fall. We asked about initial overall connection problems and mid-session tech disruptions. Clients reported that most online sessions went smoothly. At both schools, 86-87% of reported sessions started within two minutes of the scheduled time.

How long did it take to meet online and then get started with the session?					
	> 1 min.	2 min.	3-4 min	5-10 min.	10+ min.
WPU	76.8%	10.0%	5.4%	4.6%	3.3%
CU	62.8%	23.3%	7.0%	1.2%	5.8%

Table 1: Responses to survey about length of lead time for start of online sessions.

(Again, clients reported about only a small fraction of total sessions.) We did see small but significant reports of sessions at both schools (7-8%) that were delayed five minutes or more for some reason. We had not tracked late starts before, so we are not sure how to read these delays. We know some had little to do with tech as consultants juggled back-to-back sessions and dealt with normal, other non-tech distractions as they worked from home. (Indeed, in our f2f sessions, sessions sometimes run late for many non-tech reasons.) We expected more initial delays at WPU because it has no gaps between scheduled 45-minute sessions and was also far busier than CU, which builds in 15-minute breaks after each 45-minute session. But the results were very similar. In a blog post, A WPU consultant described her scramble during the spring

for workable options, including Zoom, Skype, and Meet: “Here and there, all platforms have failed... and a good old-fashioned phone call has saved the day during these desperate times” (Polidore). In the fall we asked clients: “If you lost your connection during the session, what happened?” After the chaotic spring, we were surprised to find that 85% (WPU) and 90% (CU) of the reported Fall 2020 sessions had no tech interruptions. Almost all interruptions were resolved by reconnecting to the same tools. Based on this limited data, only one session at WPU, and none at CU, were reported as completely interrupted. Staying in our “Phase One” mindset, we again saw no evidence of harm. On one hand, maybe we simply benefitted from the national embrace of video conferencing during the pandemic, especially in colleges like ours. But clients with interrupted sessions may also have been less likely to fill out anonymous surveys. And returning clients may have quickly developed tech choice habits and thereafter experienced fewer delays or interruptions. For example, Sean spent ten sessions with a graduate student who was revising her medical school statement. Deciding to meet by video on WConline and share a Google Doc draft took a few minutes in the first session— and zero time after that.

### **Local Circumstances Affected Platform Preferences**

Given our different ecosystems, we were surprised at the consistency of many client responses across both schools. But we did see very different answers to our final question. Offering ten choices, we asked what platforms clients would prefer using in the future. Though we cannot directly compare CU’s results to WPU’s results since CU allowed clients to select multiple preferences, whereas WPU’s clients selected one option, we can determine trends in clients’ preferences for the platforms they would like to use in future sessions.

Some differences are hard to explain. We don’t know why WConline was so much more popular among clients at WPU than at CU. Other differences align with systemic practices at our schools. WPU bought Zoom accounts for all students and faculty in early 2020. Although administration strongly encouraged the use of BB Collaborate and MS Teams, many faculty members preferred Zoom for classes and meetings. But CU had very limited Zoom licenses available and more strongly pressed its community to use MS Teams. The ideal choices may have been shaped by the options offered by consultants. At WPU, where consultants all had free Zoom, 13 of 14 consultants offered Zoom as their only alternate platform. The other consultant offered both Zoom and Google Meet. None offered Collaborate, Facetime, or MS Teams. (In practice, phone sessions remained our usual informal Plan C.) By contrast, due to

budget deficits and deep operational budget cuts, Erin at CU was forced to find creative ways to pay for multiple platform subscriptions in this study. All CU consultants chose to offer MS Teams, Zoom, and Google Meet as alternatives to WOnline. Although clients could have chosen any of the ten offered platforms as their ideal choice, we suspect that the choices offered to them in actual sessions shaped their preferences.

For online sessions, what way to meet would you prefer in the future?		
Platform/Technology Tool	WPU (241 clients selected one option)	CU (84 clients selected multiple options)
WOnline	154	13
Zoom	54	28
BB Collaborate	4	3
MS Teams	0	77
Google Meet	5	9
Apple FaceTime	2	15
Voice Phone Call	5	2
Texting	2	4
WhatsApp	0	0
E-tutor Session (draft drop off)	15	13

Table 2: Responses to survey about client preference for future meeting platforms.

We think the variation here offers a strong argument for tech choice. We note that these ideal platform responses would have been radically different a year ago when very few of us at either site regularly used Zoom. Plus, had we deferred to administrators' preferences for Teams and Collaborate at WPU, we would have pressed many clients into less comfortable choices. We also think clients' needs and preferences may shift rapidly in the future, and bottom-up choice systems will enable us to see and adapt to those changes more quickly.

## CONCLUSION

While we focus here on harm, we think the benefits of tech choice may be substantial, depending on local circumstances. Flexibility about location, time, and mode already make online sessions a powerful tool to enact material, cultural, and disability justice as we use them to reach clients where they are (Hamper). We expect online writing sessions to remain a large part of our practice from now on. We have many more questions about tech choice. How will it shape our pedagogy and future consultant training? What data

should we report, and what inferences should we argue about these choices in our programmatic assessments? Will more bottom-up, open systems help us meet (or maybe resist) future administrative demands to join centralized top-down systems?

We are excited that adding more tech platform options did not seem to create new barriers for our clients during this challenging year. As we continue to use and study platform choice systems, we hope to learn more about how we all can use new technologies as bridges instead of barriers in this strange new normal that we all face together.

## NOTES

1. We agree with critiques of the concept of “comfort” in WCs as a problematic goal that can limit confronting harmful or oppressive ideas and that ultimately negate any progress towards social justice in the WC (Grutsch McKinney, *Peripheral Visions*). But we also agree with Borgman and McArdle in affirming technological comfort as critical to full accessibility and, therefore, dis/ability justice. We also used tech comfort to gauge confusion or frustration.

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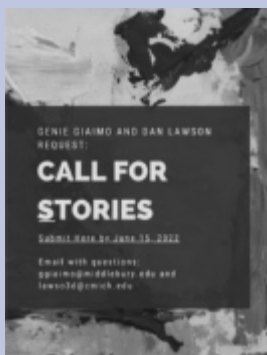
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