

BOOK REVIEW

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TAKING FLIGHT WITH OWLS ***Examining Electronic Writing Center Work***

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Taking Flight with OWLS: Examining Electronic Writing Center Work, edited by James A. Inman and Donna N. Sewell (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000, 252 pp., \$49.95)

Taking Flight with OWLS was one of five books nominated in the year 2000 for Book of the Year by the National Writing Center Association. The book represents the first time that such complete information on the theory, history, background, and operational studies of online writing centers has been put together in one text. Use of online writing laboratories (OWLS) and technology in campus writing centers is still a very controversial subject, and the information in this book helps the reader understand many of the challenges and issues that contribute to this controversy.

The work is organized into five sections with three to five related chapters in each section. The sections include chapters on definition and context for electronic writing center work, narratives of experience, asynchronous electronic tutoring, synchronous electronic tutoring, and looking to the future of electronic writing centers. The chapters seem to be an accurate reflection of the current status of online writing center work. Both the practical as well as the theoretical concerns and experiences of writing center administrators are examined. The names of the contributing authors read like a list of "who's who" in academic online writing centers. The book is written for writing center practitioners or other people who want to know more about OWLS. Much detail is given to theory and how OWLS are changing writing center theory and practice.

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Section I, "Toward a Definition and Context for Electronic Writing Center Work" includes four narratives that discuss the potential to fuse technology and writing center theory. The first two narratives, "The Spotted OWL: Online Writing Labs as Sites of Diversity, Controversy, and Identity" written by Mark Shadle, and "OWLs in Theory and Practice: A Director's Perspective" by Lady Falls Brown, discuss the development of OWLs from a historical aspect through personal insights and experiences. Later chapters in this section define the online mode of delivery in the writing center and provide a comparison between the expectation of an online session to that of a face-to-face session

Section II, "Narratives of Experience" is exactly that. This section contains five narratives that explore how different writing centers have incorporated the use of technology into their teaching. The authors discuss topics from the amount of planning and forethought that goes into starting an OWL to the maintenance and growth of the fledgling OWL. Because the nuts-and-bolts information in this section is provided by experienced practitioners, it is very useful to those writing center administrators who are trying to develop or maintain an online tutoring space.

Sections III, "Asynchronous Electronic Tutoring," and IV, "Synchronous Electronic Tutoring," examine the two different types of online tutoring and are based on the authors' personal research. The articles in Section III explore both the advantages (for distance learners and students who hesitate to seek face-to-face writing help) and the disadvantages (lack of on-going dialog and face-to-face help) of asynchronous tutoring. Section IV articles describe the use of synchronous tutoring exploring both the advantages (both parties can view the paper at the same time) and disadvantages (ethics and improper conduct) of real-time tutoring. MOOs and integrating interaction into the sessions are specifically addressed. This section concludes with an article that addresses the ethics and pedagogy of "plugged" and "unplugged" environments.

Section V, "Looking to the Future" is probably the most thought-provoking section of the book. Articles in this section address planning issues in preparing for future use of technology tools and writing centers as distance education services. The articles in this section discuss the future of OWLs in education, and acknowledge that "technology has permanently changed the environment for writing in post-secondary education, both in English departments and across campus." Muriel Harris went on to assert in her article titled "Making Up Tomorrow's Agenda," that technology is both "enabling and disabling for students." She asserts that acquiring basic computer literacy and strategies for composing and researching online are critical skills that students must be taught to master. The section concludes with a thought-provoking article by Eric Crump entitled, "How Many Technoprovocateurs Does It Take to Create Intersivity?"

Taking Flight with OWLs is an important book in its collection of information about online writing centers. However, the reviewers believe that another book is needed to address the "how to" of the technical aspects of starting and operating an online writing center. The next book should provide information on equipment, software, connectivity and technical support issues associated with different types of OWLs. Guidelines on what to look for and ask for in terms of supporting technologies would be very instructive. Questions including "How can I set up an OWL?" "How can we support ongoing technical operations of an OWL at a 'nuts and bolts' level?" and "Can you give us some case studies of how to set up different types of OWLs?" could be addressed. Another area of concern that could be addressed in future publications is the lack of tools available specifically for online writing center work. Currently, online writing centers are experimenting with a variety of technical tools such as electronic mail, courseware such as Blackboard, MOOs, and other applications, but no one seems to have the ideal answer or software applications written especially to address all of the needs of OWL services. Fur-

thermore, better tools are needed to provide synchronous opportunities for online writing center work. Although online writing labs across the county are experimenting with tools to provide a better way of working and providing services, few good solutions are widely known.

Other books concerning online writing center work include *Wiring the Writing Center* by Eric Hobson and *Electronic Writing Center: Computing the Field of Composition* by David Coogan.

Taking Flight with OWLs is an important addition to the literature on online writing centers. Since research on OWLs has largely used

qualitative methodology, the reviewers were particularly encouraged that this book addressed quantitative research methodology and provided ideas on how it could be done. The book was also good at discussing sources of funding and funding issues for OWLs, which is important to almost all online writing center operations. For an experienced manager of a writing center with OWL operations, this book was helpful in providing ideas for “fine tuning” operations, but stopped short of providing practical “how to” information on online tools and technology aspects of delivering online writing services.