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A Rhetorical Analysis of Physical Writing Centers and Online Tutoring Resources

Introduction

When I hear the term, “writing center,” I picture myself walking into the Trinity College English building and making my way through the narrow hallway that ends up at the Trinity College Writing Center. While other people’s interpretations of these words may differ from mine, it is likely that most students, scholars, and teachers would associate a Writing Center with a physical space – whether that is a desk, a room, or an entire building. However, there is a rising number of universities that have formed online writing centers; many of these websites are supplementary to an on-campus center, and there are some schools that rely solely on these virtual tutoring sites for all writing center needs. Online writing help may be a useful tool in addition to a center on campus, but these digital tutoring resources are not a suitable replacement for in-person appointments, and they do not provide the same benefits as a physical writing center.

The obvious distinction between writing centers and online tutoring resources is that one has a physical representation and the other only exists through the screen of a computer. However, incorporating rhetoric as a method of analysis is crucial in order to explore more complicated reasoning behind what *makes* physical writing centers completely different from

any sort of “digital writing center.” Looking at writing centers through a rhetorical lens makes it possible to recognize how the spatial, social, and academic features of the center function to define the space as a “writing center.” Additionally, observing the rhetorical strategies within online tutoring resources reveals how these websites use technology as a problem-solving agent that strives to bridge the gap between in-person collaboration and online tutoring.

Physical Writing Centers

First, one of the most important features of a writing center is the physical space and how it functions as a stable part of a center’s identity. Unlike college classes, which have the tendency to switch locations semester to semester, the consistent location of a writing center is often a large part of its identity (Tarsa). For example, the Trinity Writing Center is located in the English building on campus, and it has been there since it first opened over thirty years ago. If a student is in search of the Trinity Writing Center, they ask for it by name, and most people on our small campus would confidently direct the student towards the writing center.

Giving writing centers a definitive home on campus not only makes them easy to find, but it shows how writing centers fit into a college community. Since the Trinity Writing Center is attached to the English Department, it encourages the students who take classes in the English building to stop by the writing center before or after class. While writing centers are great resources for students from all academic disciplines, it is often the case that students in writing-intensive courses utilize the center the most. Having Trinity’s Writing Center in the English building places it in close proximity to the classrooms that teach essay-based classes. Additionally, because the Trinity Writing Center is attached to an academic building, it marks the center as a reputable resource for students; whereas, if the center was located in the

basement of a dorm, it may be perceived as unprofessional or less serious. While it is important to recognize that writing centers are a separate entity – not an extension of a school’s English Department – the physical presence of a writing center on a college campus does alter how people interpret the writing center and the work done there.

A writing center’s location contributes to the identity of the center, however, another defining feature of writing centers is their internal appearance and spatial organization. “Spatiality” expert, Henri Lefebvre, famously discussed the notion that “space is a social product” (Lefebvre 289). Instead of blindly assuming that a writing center’s layout just is what it is, taking a step back to rhetorically analyze the spatial design of writing centers reveals additional goals that the center strives to accomplish. As Stephan North emphasizes in his contributions to writing center discourse, the center is not a “fix-it shop” for grammar; writing centers instead focus on creating a comfortable environment for writing and discussion between tutor and student (North 435). Writing centers are unique in the sense that they place such a high value on not only their tutoring practices but also on the environment where students work.

To look at a detailed example, a photo on the Trinity Writing Center website shows an action shot of the Trinity Writing Center (Refer to index for photo). This photograph was taken from the view of someone who just walked into the room. Upon entering the Trinity Writing Center, the first person in sight is the Coordinator who works at the front desk. The Coordinator welcomes students into the Writing Center, helps them find the Writing Associate who they made an appointment with, and is available to help students reserve future appointments. The placement of the Coordinator’s desk ensures that students who come into the Trinity Writing

Center are always met with a smile and are assisted quickly; this immediate interaction decreases any chances of a student walking into the Writing Center and standing in the doorway without any idea of where to go.

Beyond the Coordinator's desk, the room is filled with spacious, white tables and comfortable, padded chairs. Not only do these work stations provide a physically comfortable place to sit, but both the chairs and the tables are on wheels. The option of easy mobility creates opportunities to rearrange the setup of the room based on the situation. To set up for one-on-one tutoring appointments, it is common for there to be many individual tables spread out around the room. The separation between tables is large enough that each student/tutor pairing has space and privacy to work, while also remaining close enough to students at other tables to ask questions or share ideas. Additionally, there is usually one larger group of tables pushed together in the corner of the room in case someone needs room to spread out or a group of students wishes to work on a group project together. If tables are not appealing to a student, the corner of the room also has four upholstered cushion chairs that provide a soft seat for discussions. The physical flexibility of the room layout makes the Trinity Writing Center capable of adapting its spatial organization to one that best suits the students during their appointments.

On top of a practical workspace, the Trinity Writing Center is also a space that encourages mental separation from any sort of "normal classroom" feel. There is no regimented structure of desks bolted into the ground and no migraine-inducing fluorescent lighting. Instead, the Writing Center features many windows that provide an abundance of natural lighting; walls that are painted in a soft green/blue hue, a color that is meant to be

calming; and the warm ceiling lights illuminate the space with the perfect amount of brightness. The combination of these aspects function to make the Trinity Writing Center feel more like a home than a classroom. Not only does this align with the goal of making writing centers feel like a comfortable workspace where students *want* to spend time writing, but as a Writing Associate, this space does feel like a “home” to me, especially when it is filled with fellow Writing Associates and other Trinity students.

A writing center’s environment contributes greatly to the type of work that goes on and the methods used to do it. If people feel “comfortable enough to come to the writing center as a writing space... they would also feel comfortable getting help and utilizing the other services that the writing center offers” (Howard and Schendel 4). The main point behind the spatial design of writing centers is to create a welcoming environment where there can be collaborative, productive, and comfortable discussions about writing. One of (if not the most) important features of writing center work is how it is centered around collaboration. When a student has the ability to sit face to face with a Writing Associate, the opportunities for the appointment are nearly endless; it is no secret why in-person collaboration is an integral part of writing center pedagogy.

Online “Writing Centers”

The prior discussion analyzes the defining features of physical writing centers and how these characteristics function to make a writing center. Meanwhile, technological advancements are making it more common for universities to incorporate online tutoring into their writing centers. There is nothing wrong with having supplementary resources available for students to access, in fact, there can never be too many resources for writing! However, an

issue arises when these online tutoring websites refer to themselves as “writing centers.” While there may be similarities between online tutoring resources and physical writing centers, they are not synonymous. Online tutoring sites cannot translate certain features of physical writing centers onto a digital platform; it is the design of the spatial environment and in-person collaboration that *makes* physical writing centers into the fantastic resource they are.

In order to try to bridge this gap between digital tutoring and physical writing centers, online tutoring resources rely on technology to present themselves as everything physical writing centers are and more. Collectively, online tutoring resources highlight features of accessibility and equity within their websites in order to compensate for their “writing centers” inability to offer a physical space, in-person meetings, or certain services. However, rhetorically analyzing these websites also reveals how an emphasis on technology’s convenience as a problem-solving solution functions as a disguise for the ways that online tutoring resources lack the abilities and goals that are foundational characteristics of physical writing centers.

In order to give concrete examples and show similarities between different online tutoring resources, this portion of the analysis will focus on the online writing centers of three colleges: Liberty University, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and University of Wisconsin-Madison. First, it is important to make note that all of these schools refer to their digital tutoring resources as “online writing centers.” Including the term “writing center” in the title encourages those who visit the website to understand the purpose and ability of the resource as that of a physical writing center. As someone who has spent a great amount of time in the Trinity Writing Center (as explained above), it is clear that there are many aspects that coincide with the term “writing center” that cannot translate to an online platform. However, instead of

simply titling these tutoring resources by a different name, these websites place a strong emphasis on how technology provides a sense of equity and accessibility that physical writing centers cannot offer.

One overarching feature that contributes to this idea of equity and accessibility is each university's online mission statement is fostered around catering to an ambiguous "you." While at a first glance this seems great, this hyper-focus on offering equal opportunities for all the students who would want to utilize one of these online resources creates unbreakable boundaries that limits extent that "you" can use the resource. On the University of Nebraska's Online Writing Center, it states that their services are made to meet all "your" needs, but they immediately follow up on this claim by including a list of parameters that are necessary to "ensure that all interested students have the ability to make appointments" ("Online Writing Center Services"). This list includes time availabilities for these 25 or 50-minute sessions, which are restricted to bizarre, short time slots throughout the day; the total time open for students to make appointments on Tuesday, for example, adds up to only 4.5 hours. For a school with over 20,000 undergraduate students (not even accounting for graduate students), having less than 5 hours of appointment time per day is not sufficient. It is unlikely that students who are desperate for help on their papers will take the time to look at the relationship between the limited appointment times compared to the number of students at the school. However, for a writing center whose mission statement is to "be there for you," you better hurry to grab one of these (not so easily accessible) appointment times before they are all filled up.

Even if a student is able to secure one of the sought-after appointments, the process is nowhere near complete. Another main feature of these online writing centers is the emphasis

on convenience and ease that technology provides. While the idea of tutoring sessions that take place on the internet seems convenient, the functionality of this resource is restricted. For example, the Liberty University Online Writing Center webpage is scattered with phrases that encourage a reader to feel relaxed and excited by the virtual writing center that edits your papers while you sit in the comfort of your dorm room. The text is catered towards the student; there is a “knowledgeable staff to help you with your writing needs,” and the tutors “look forward to serving you and helping you grow as a writer” (“Online Writing Center – Liberty”). These inspiring messages are immediately followed by a kind, “please familiarize yourself with our services, policies, tutorials, and resources before using our services” (“Online Writing Center – Liberty”). The gentle language addresses the student’s needs, but positive prose can only go so far to cover up the complications that lie underneath.

All the “ease” that technology provides for these online tutoring resources comes with strings attached. Liberty University’s writing center page highlights the convenience of the resource, but this covers up the complicated requirements and steps that it takes to actually submit a paper and utilize the website. Depending on the tutoring style that a student wishes to pursue (synchronous or asynchronous), there is a laundry list of instructions to follow in order to make sure the paper gets submitted correctly. Synchronous tutoring on an online writing center requires Skype so that the participants can be actively engaged during the session. However, as anyone who has used Skype knows, there are a myriad of technical difficulties that can occur. For a Liberty University Skype tutoring session, which is the closest thing to an in-person appointment, the student must have the latest version of Skype, a proper headset, microphone, and speakers; the student must also submit a written appointment request that

includes a properly outlined (according to the website's requirements) paper proposal. Failure to cooperate with all of these instructions will result in a canceled appointment. Beyond these essential steps, Liberty also has a lengthy list of what to do if there are "connection problems" during a Skype appointment. All of these solutions require the student (not the tutor) to restart his/her computer, clear browser cookies, or contact IT help, which would take up a significant amount of the appointment's time limit.

Similarly, it may be assumed that choosing an asynchronous tutoring method would be less complicated, but that is not the case. Liberty's online writing center presents this option as an easy way to turn in an essay and receive feedback on it a couple days later. However, in order to submit a paper, it must be a draft that is at least one page but less than ten; the student can only submit one draft per assignment, and no papers already containing comments or grades will be reviewed; students are also not allowed to submit mid-terms or finals ("Online Writing Center – Liberty"). Like the Skype sessions, this option encourages students to get excited over the convenience and lack of effort required to utilize these resources. But the use of technology that makes these methods possible is also the reason why they are so complicated behind the scenes. It is likely that by the time a student realizes the lengthy list of steps behind each tutoring session, it would be too late to cancel an appointment. Unlike physical writing centers, students do not have the flexibility to show up with any type of writing. The "accessibility" and "equity" that these websites offer really only applies to papers that fulfil certain requirements.

The online appointments on the University of Wisconsin-Madison's website are similar to the two discussed above; they only offer three-hour windows on three nights of the week,

and the steps required to engage in a successful session are more complicated than meets the eye. Of course, these features are most likely not what the university wants to advertise. Instead of addressing the limited appointment openings or the annoying instructions that come with submitting a paper, the university highlights how technology makes their online writing center an equitable resource for all. To really drive this point home, the Wisconsin-Madison Online Writing Center incorporates blogs on their tutoring webpage to expand on how their writing center is about “equity for students.” The Wisconsin-Madison’s “About our Writing Center” page states that “undergraduates have always been the core clientele for the Writing Center, and we are proud to serve a consistently increasing number of undergraduate writers each semester” (“About the Writing”). However, despite the fact that undergraduate students are the demographic that utilizes the (physical and online) writing center the most, the blog on “equity for students” hardly discusses undergraduate students at all.

This specific blog is written by Maggie Hamper and is titled, “The Online Writing Center is About Equity for Students (and You Too).” This blog only discusses students who “lack support” (ie. Single parent commuter, someone who works part-time, students with a physical or psychiatric disability) in order to claim that the Wisconsin-Madison Online Writing Center is “about sociomaterial equity” (Hamper). When this article says the “Online Writing Center is for *you*,” this “you” is only described as students who have extenuating circumstances that would prevent them from being able to come into a physical writing center. These students are explicitly labeled as those “who are most at risk of not making it through college” (Hamper). Not only does this generalization lump many people in extremely different situations together into one group of “struggling students,” but it also paints the online writing center as a place for

only those who need significant help – which perpetuates the negative stigma of the writing center as a fix-it shop for weaker writers – and is the opposite of what any writing center would want to promote.

Conclusion (Consequences)

As a Writing Associate at the Trinity College Writing Center, I am a passionate advocate for writing resources on college campuses. Especially with the rapid progression of technology, it is no secret that more and more online tutoring websites are popping up on the Internet. While these digital resources are beneficial for students, their title should not include the name, “writing center.” After a discussion of writing center pedagogy and a detailed analysis of Trinity’s Writing Center, it is clear that certain features that exist in a physical writing center cannot be emulated through the screen of a computer. However, looking at Liberty University, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and University of Wisconsin-Madison’s online “writing centers” through a rhetorical lens reveals how these resources exploit technology in an effort to compensate for the inability to utilize a physical space or in-person appointments.

Using rhetorical analysis as a method of observation opens up opportunities to unveil what is hiding beneath the surface. It is crucial to question even the most axiomatic features because when it comes to a rhetorical perspective, there is no such thing as the absolute truth. While it is necessary to analyze the characteristics of a space, website, or source, it is easy to overlook what is *not* there. In the case of online “writing centers,” their collective tendency to capitalize on technology in order to try to create a digital version of a physical writing center causes them to lose the one aspect that really matters – what it means to *be* a writing center. The consequence of directing the majority of their attention towards emphasizing

“accessibility” and “equity” subsequently diminishes the visible importance of writing, the student writer, and the writing process.

This is an unsettling revelation to notice in online tutoring resources; however, this is only the tip of the iceberg. Completing this project has sparked the question, what does this mean for the future of rhetoric and how technology is incorporated into this discourse? Using rhetoric as both a method of analysis and a strategy of execution seems to be a foundational component of the field of rhetoric, and I cannot see any changes that would disrupt these theories. On the other hand, technology, and its relationship with accessibility and equality, needs to be reassessed. In a time where information can be completely distorted depending on the medium it is presented through, the role of rhetorical analysis is more important than ever. Technology’s influence is powerful enough to reshape anything it touches; it is up to rhetoric to take on this challenge and recognize the implications that technological development has on society today and in the future.

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Photo from the Trinity College Writing Center Website

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