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Usability Research in the Writing Lab: Sustaining Discourse and Pedagogy

Michael J. Salvo [a,*], Jingfang Ren [b], H. Allen Brizee [a], Tammy S. Conard-Salvo [a]

[a] *Purdue University, Department of English, 500 Oval Drive, West Lafayette, IN 47907, United States*
[b] *Michign Tech, Houghton, MI, United States*

Abstract

Redesigning Purdue's Online Writing Lab (OWL) presented the opportunity for collaboration among Writing Center and Professional Writing Program members. While the article briefly describes the OWL redesign process, the argument focuses on collaboration and presents a model for sustainable intraprogram collaboration. Following Hawhee, usability research is defined as "invention-in-the-middle," which offers a model for understanding research process as part of the infrastructure of new media instruction as described by DeVoss, Cushman, and Grabill. This article offers four stakeholder perspectives on the process of participatory technology design: of writing center administrators, graduate students, technical writing practitioners, and writing program graduate faculty members. The model asserted by this article presents a dynamic understanding of expertise and of fluidity in the roles of participants. Collaborative usability research, seen as invention-in-the-middle, contributes both to long-term sustainability of technological artifacts as well as the discursive interactions among stakeholders whose work supports these artifacts.
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1. Introduction

Beginning in 2004, the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) underwent significant design changes in order to improve usability and navigability, launching a new design in 2006. And the process of redesign has not ended. The OWL site has been and remains enormously popular, averaging over 30 million hits per year prior to the redesign project. Since being redesigned, the OWL has surpassed 100 million annual visits from all 50 U.S. states and over 150 countries around the world. Yet users were concerned that they still could not find certain materials or easily locate answers to writing questions. Historically, the Purdue OWL served as a library of print-based writing handouts that instructors distributed in class and that students used independently to work on writing issues. During its decade of existence as a web destination, the OWL grew to more than 200 static handouts that reveal its print-culture roots. These handouts, designed mainly to be printed and distributed to students, have been continuously added to the OWL site, and the Writing Lab's administrators, content developers, and OWL technicians have been interested in better using the medium—the World Wide Web—to meet users' needs and to build an effective information architecture that supported how students, writing instructors, and other users actually use the web-based content. The OWL redesign

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: salvo@purdue.edu (M.J. Salvo).

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team began to consider how the materials could take fuller advantage of web technology to support best practices in writing instruction.

OWL differs significantly in size, scope, and purpose from many web-based educational resources. It is best described as, in the language of Dànielle DeVoss, Ellen Cushman, and Jeffrey Grabill, *infrastructural*. OWL staff members receive requests from other campuses for advice on replicating the online repository, and we often find it difficult (if not impossible) to accurately describe the substantial resources, time, and effort spent establishing, coding, populating, organizing, and maintaining this popular resource. It is truly part of the infrastructure of a large, complex, and successful writing program, and its redesign and redeployment is the outcome not just of technical expertise but of rhetorical expertise and a commitment to dialogic engagement among stakeholders located within the Writing Lab, first-year writing program, professional writing program, and graduate program in rhetoric in a particular institutional context.

The process of redesigning this large and comprehensive repository has been challenging, particularly as Purdue's Writing Lab administrators worked to incorporate usability and user-centered design principles into the new site. This task proved to be outside the realm of Writing Lab administrators' expertise. The Writing Lab approached the Professional Writing Program to develop and administer usability testing in order to gain valuable feedback from users about ways to tailor OWL to its users' needs. While the process of usability testing and the resulting data has yielded important and interesting information about users and creating usable writing center technologies, one significant outcome of the process has been the collaborative relationship strengthened between the Writing Lab and the Professional Writing Program. This article focuses on the unique characteristics of the relationship and how we see it as part of our professional and intellectual infrastructure, a context for further innovation, and as such, as heuristic for invention of pedagogy and technology integration.

In these pages, we describe the Online Writing Lab, or OWL, as a discursive technology, a techno-rhetorical artifact, that supports interaction among different stakeholders to articulate programmatic needs during the redesign process. This space became the site for intraprogram collaboration as well as a space for exploration and articulation of new research methods and ways of understanding and developing writing expertise. Taking inspiration from Debra Hawhee's (2002a) articulation of *kairos*, our argument posits that OWL's process of usability research and iterative redesign elaborates and develops the model of "invention-in-the-middle" that constitutes contemporary usage of kairos as an invention heuristic. The "invention-in-the-middle" model supports Patricia Sullivan's (1989) call for taking a broader view of usability as research and not mere testing by situating the OWL usability project *vis-à-vis* the landscape of a rich body of usability research (p. 257). Further, it extends and complicates her rationale for a broader conception of usability by encouraging reflective conversations among both current and previous stakeholders in the techno-rhetorical contact zone. In this process, rather than argue that scholars with specialties in computers and writing concentrate on any specific technological hardware or software system, we have come to understand that the specialist in literacy and technology can define her expertise by bringing technology-aided tools to bear on the challenges existing at the nexus of literacy, writing programs, and research. Following Hawhee's understanding of kairos as invention-in-the-middle and the infrastructural argument asserted by DeVoss et al., we argue for usability as an infrastructural heuristic for continually reimagining OWL as a site for intraprogram collaboration.

While the project centered on redesigning Purdue's OWL, this paper is not specifically about the nuts and bolts process of redesign. Instead, our collaboration is the focus of this article. While the technical know-how was certainly an important element of redesign, we argue that this knowledge was secondary to maintaining effective dialogic relationships among stakeholders on the team. Drawing upon theories of stakeholder management, we see the OWL not as a static entity but as information architecture constituting and constituted by collaboration and competition among "multiple and diverse constituencies and interests" (Post, Preston, & Sachs, 2002, p. 3). As such, its well-being and success depend not so much on tangible technological, human, and other resources as on intangible assets, particularly stakeholder relationships.

Defined by Post et al. (2002) as the individuals and constituencies that are voluntarily or involuntarily the potential beneficiaries and/or risk-bearers of an enterprise or community, stakeholders bring with them a range of foci and specialties. Effective management of stakeholder relationships involves working with and valuing contributions made across areas of expertise. The challenge remains to avoid claims for legitimacy based in particular stakeholder strengths and to establish and nurture sustainable interaction among these stakeholders. As coding becomes secondary to technological infrastructure—as reflected in the computers and writing literature that moves from stand-alone computers to programming tools to establishing and maintaining technological spaces (Cummings, 2006; Powell, 2007; Walker,

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