

## Introduction

There are perennial topics of conversation for writing center professionals: assessment, accreditation, status, staff development, general tips and tricks, and the tools necessary for writing center work. These discussions frequently reappear on the community's listserv and in writing center publications. However, no conversation is more pervasive than writing center space: where a center should be located, what a center should look like, what a center should feel like, what should happen in the space, and what should be the uses of the space. The scope of the conversation treats space as though it's neutral territory. Writing centers are sites of practice or places in which things happen; predominantly, tutors work one-on-one with students on their textual projects. We tend to ignore how our spatial arrangements enable certain practices and suppress others; our treatment of space-as-neutral hides the consequences from us.

Only recently has the community problematized space, moving the dialogue from *what a center should do* to *what it means when a center does*. In this critical vein, we approach our review of writing centers as spaces that impact their participants. Our treatment of writing center spaces follows a continuum. We move from the material, tangible, physical writing center to the more ethereal, digital space. We explore what it means to occupy a particular space and what identity constructions are possible in our physical and digital spaces.

We use the basic conventions of a review to frame our discussion: we provide an overview and summary of key texts, place them in conversation with each other, and the trace then movement of that conversation. However, we also disrupt the conventions of a review as our webtext approaches argument. In essence, we provide a general overview, giving our readers the gist of the writing center conversation, but we offer new insights as we theorize the space and place of writing centers.

Our two sections – A Treatment of Physical Space: A Review in Five Texts and A Foyeristic View of OWLs– can be read as discrete, topical reviews. However, our conclusion places both reviews in conversation, as parts of a coherent dialogue.

We approached our sections chronologically, but we recognize that space is “stubbornly simultaneous” (Soja, 1989, p. 2), experienced as an amalgam of sights, sounds, textures, colors, and smells. Space evokes, provokes, and conjures. However, the constraints of language “dictate a sequential succession” (p. 2) of details and ideas. Fortunately, our limitations as writers are not the same as those of our readers, particularly within the environment of a web text. We hope that you move as you please, backwards and forwards, in the designed order, out of order, and perhaps asynchronously. Here, we apply “asynchronous” as a computer programmer would: wherein multiple threads or tasks happen at once.

## A Treatment of Physical Space: A Review in Five Texts

Here, we identify texts that characterize how the writing center community talks about space. There are many texts we could have chosen, but for the purposes of our review, we decided on the following representative samples: two brief articles from early issues of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* (WLN), excerpts from the 1993 book *Writing Centers in Context: Twelve Case Studies*, two recent articles about writing center space, and a series of webtexts promoting a new writing center. Each of these texts addresses the physical appearance: room layout, furniture, lighting, decorative features, and location. They also point to the same underlying assumptions regarding space, nodding to common values and beliefs within the community, such as an inviting space is conducive to learning. In addition, these works implicitly point to some of the community's anxieties over institutional status and power.

### The Writing Lab Newsletter (WLN)

We begin with two short texts from the WLN because they represent some of the earliest public conversations regarding space. The WLN is the writing center community's first journal. It began in April 1977, and for the first several years of its existence, it served primarily as a forum for the community's questions and concerns (not unlike a modern-day list-serv). The earlier issues of the WLN featured profiles of individual centers. They were largely descriptive and provided information such as individual center histories, reporting lines, staff make-up, staff training, equipment/technology, and descriptions of writing center space.

In the April, 1978 edition of the newsletter the publication first makes reference to physical space. Virginia Stone chronicles the design and construction of the English Learning Center at Del Mar College:

The wall between two classrooms in the English Building was taken down, the floor was carpeted, and 34 carrels equipped with Wolensak Tape Players and Sawyer Slide Projectors and five tables for programmed materials and testing were moved in. . . a counter storage unit was put in front of the library shelves on one wall, and two file cabinets and a desk for the instructor and the assistant completed the furniture arrangement. . . Pictures were hung on a picture rail on three sides of the room, a wallpaper mural of a wooded scene was put on the fourth wall behind the shelves, and hanging baskets of devil's ivy and planters of ficus trees completed the décor. (p. 5)

Stone goes on to provide information about the ELC's funding sources and budget, essential equipment and materials, and curriculum. According to Stone, it is a space that opened under "almost ideal conditions" (p. 5), and while she doesn't explicitly share the conditions under which the center opens, it is clear that the center has ample funding. For example, the ELC had \$20,000 in soft money for hardware and software (\$67,000 adjusted for 2010 inflation). Stone also does not elaborate on the ELC's aesthetic elements, but ends her piece with a nod to those elements: the ELC "justifies its existence by creating a pleasant atmosphere for the students while they work at essentially egregious remedial tasks" (p. 5).

Her comments about the physical space are significant because they are not only the first spatial discussions to appear in the journal, but they also spark a dialogue. A few WLN issues later (February, 1979) Richard B. Larsen in his “A Note on Lab Layout” calls attention to Stone’s piece – particularly the section where she discusses her center’s decor (pictures, mural of a wooded scene, hanging baskets). He argued that, “pleasant surroundings can make the learning process itself more pleasant and therefore easier for the typical anxiety –ridden lab student” (p. 3).

In nodding to Stone, Larsen extends her implied claims: *ideal conditions* are the result of plentiful funding and the freedom to design an attractive learning environment. He says:

If you, lab person, have inherited the shabby back room of gymnasium full of old sox and jocks, my heart goes out to you . . . For the more fortunate among us, those blessed with the choices and the money to back them, allow me to enter this plea for the humanization of a skills center with color and flora. (p. 4)

While the two WLN pieces are brief, they point to significant and lasting trends in the writing center community. They forward that space is not value neutral. Space can shape how one acquires knowledge (i.e., one’s learning behavior), and they assume that an ideal space can only exist if a center has access to significant capital.

#### Writing Center in Context: Twelve Case Studies

Joyce Harris’ and Jeanette Kinkead’s 1993 edited collection, *Writing Centers in Context: Twelve Case Studies* does much of the same work as the WLN center profiles. Like the WLN texts, the book offers general descriptions of writing centers, including information about the centers’ histories, chronology of a typical day, administration, and physical description – information the editors identify as the “defining characteristics” of each individual program (p. xviii). It is also important to note that *Writing Centers in Context* is one of the first book-length publications on writing centers. This detail is significant because it fomented the collection as a historical “go-to” text for writing center scholars.

In their introduction, Harris and Kinkead maintain that each writing center profiled is unique to its home institution. However, the profilers talk about their physical space in ways that are remarkably similar to and reminiscent of the WLN profiles. Of the twelve descriptions, nine emphasize the affective dimensions of physical space. For example, the Purdue Writing Center:

is set up so that students who walk in first see the receptionist’s desk and a smiling face staring at them, as well as couches, the plants, and the informal arrangement of tables and chairs around the room . . . The room is also a mix of comfortable, old donated couches, tables, plants, posters, coffeepots, a recycling bin for soda cans and paper, and even a popcorn machine, all of which signal (we hope) that this mess is also a friendly, nonthreatening, nonclassroom environment where conversation and questions can fly from one table to another. (p. 6)

At the University of Southern California center, if one were to look:

...across the main room from the reception area, one [would] immediately hear a buzz of talk and catch a glimpse of plants, pictures, and posters. In the corner of the room is a blue-and-white sofa/loveseat combination for those who prefer a relaxed informal tutoring style; on a nearby coffee table is a plant, a dictionary, and a few haphazardly placed, brightly covered textbooks . . . Both rooms are carpeted, so students and consultants sometimes sit on the floor. (p. 106)

At Harvard, the:

...furniture is comfortable and inviting, with two couches and several chairs in the reception area, rugs in all offices, and attractive posters on the walls . . . At high stress times, [they] offer trays of cookies or fruit to those who visit. (p. 118)

Not all of the profiles are elaborate; a few are fairly basic, offering only sparse descriptions that read more like inventories (see for example, Medgar Evers and CUNY writing centers). However, most of the physical descriptions include words such as comfortable, inviting, friendly, nonthreatening, non-institutional, relaxed, informal, and attractive.

In his review of the text, Brad Hughes called the 12 profiles “a synecdoche,” a part that stands for the larger whole of the writing center community (1994, p. 173). If he is correct in his assertion, then “writing center” takes on a connotative meaning, one that points to the same outcome even though writing centers themselves are the result of their local, institutional contexts. The community’s identity is dependent upon the affective dimensions of space-- the tangible details that make people feel comfortable or at ease and that make these spaces decidedly non-classroom.

Larsen’s language in his WLN profile – the center as space where anxious students work on “egregious remedial tasks” –may shed some light on the community’s desire to make a space comfortable and inviting. Students at his institution visited the writing center for remediation. They were underprepared for college-level reading and writing and perhaps anxious about their place in the university. Writing centers still serve these students today, and tutors can sense their palpable discomfort when they work with them. These students have anxieties about their performance in school, and they choose not to seek out help for fear of being labeled “deficient.” A comfortable, inviting, and non-institutional space – one with soft lighting and comfy chairs—is *designed* to ease a student’s apprehensions.

However, writing centers serve more than underprepared students. The writing center community, especially in the mid-80s and 90s asserted that they were not remedial or supplemental but rather spaces for all writers (see Stephen North’s “Idea of a Writing Center”). Several of the profiles provided in *Writing Centers in Context* make this same point. For example, the Purdue center clientele consists of “freshman in the regular two-semester composition sequence as well as . . . students in the developmental course and the one-semester honors course . . . students in English as a second language courses. . . business and technical writing . . . creative writing . . . journalism” (p. 9); in short, everyone at every level of writing ability. Lehigh makes a similar claim about its student population. Their students are a “self-selected” group who are doing fairly well in their freshman English classes but “perhaps

earning a high C or low B” (p. 86). These students want “to do better since [they are] used to doing well” (p. 86). The rest of the students who visit the Lehigh center “vary from the very good writer who responds to the slightest suggestion with originality and insight to the writer who is struggling to pass a course” (p. 87).

How might we reconcile the two competing notions of writing centers (centers as spaces for remediation and centers as spaces for all writers) and their common aims for physical space? One answer is that when students are comfortable, they are more likely to perform in ways that speak to learning outcomes – outcomes that are determined by a writing center’s mission. Writing centers have long been touted as safe spaces for learning, spaces where “experimentation and practice are encouraged” (Harris, 1988). Students used to conventional classroom environments encounter a writing center and notice that the space is different. The traditional classroom promotes a specific kind of student-to-student, student-to-teacher interaction, one that’s conducive to one-way communication: lecture and listening. By contrast, the writing center space promotes a certain kind of student-to-tutor engagement, one that encourages conversation and collaboration: student and tutor can sit side by side at tables, slouch on couches, or sit on the floor. A comfortable writing center environment is also conducive to a level of intimacy and familiarity that cannot be replicated in the traditional classroom. The comfortable and inviting reified writing center space – counter to the equally reified classroom space—is decidedly low stakes. For example, students do not compete for a teacher’s attention or shrink from a teacher’s gaze by using tactics like sitting in the back row and avoiding eye contact. Ideally, in a low-stakes space, one can experiment and practice without competition or fear of failure.

### Leaving Home Sweet Home: Towards a Critical Review of Writing Center Spaces

Two recent writing center texts complicate conceptions of the writing center’s physical space: Jackie Grutsch McKinney’s 2005 *Writing Center Journal* article, “Leaving Home Sweet Home: Towards Critical Readings of Writing Center Spaces” and Melissa Nicolas’ 2004 *Academic Exchange Quarterly* piece, “The Politics of Writing Center as Location.” We begin with the Grutsch McKinney piece because it contends with texts we’ve already addressed – namely Harris and Kinkead’s *Writing Centers in Context*.

In addition to *Writing Centers in Context*, Grutsch McKinney examines various W-Center posts, Hadfield et al. “An Ideal Writing Center: Re-Imagining Space and Design” (an article that appears in the 2003 edited collection, *The Center Will Hold*) and many other pertinent texts. She argued:

Writing center spaces tend to be marked with particular objects to achieve a certain mood, serve specific purposes, or send a particular message to those who use the space. Having couches or photos or coffee pots is an effort to construct a space different from classrooms and other impersonal institutional spaces. An unintended result, however, might be that these objects become prescriptions for these spaces; to be legible – to be read—as a ‘writing center,’ a space needs to have a particular array of objects. And because many writing center professionals seem to be operating under the tacitly accepted notion that writing centers should be welcoming, cozy, comfortable,

friendly spots where talk about writing can happen, one prescription wins out: writing centers should be like home. (p. 7)

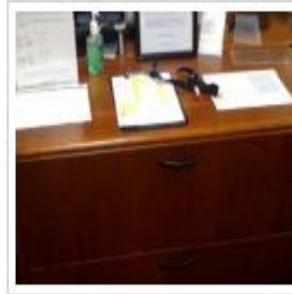
Grutsch McKinney challenges the writing center community to complicate notions of space, especially the affective dimensions that connote “home.” She posited that in the writing center community’s early history, “Professionals in the field created friendly centers . . . for conscious reasons—they did not want to be that other scary, institutional lab for remedial students, they wanted students to feel welcome. . . like one big family” (p. 9). If we juxtapose Grutsch McKinney’s article with the WLN profiles, we see that her assumptions are founded. We also come to the same conclusions in our discussion of [\*Writing Centers in Context\*](#).

However, she also argued that the home metaphor “distracts us from the material realities of actual writing centers” (p. 10). Writing centers that are homey – marked by objects such as art on the walls, couches, soft lighting – representing middle-class conceptions of the domestic space: “These patterns may not be shared by all students [. . .] when our clientele might include a greater portion of students who are not white or privileged or American than the general university population” (p. 16). One’s “home life may be abusive or dangerous” (p. 16). In addition, “one cannot ignore the gender implications of home” (p. 17) and the corresponding assumptions that equate teaching with mothering wherein teaching becomes a non-intellectual endeavor. In short, Grutsch McKinney establishes all of the ways in which the writing-center-as-home is a deeply problematic metaphor.

Given her laudable efforts to reshape the conversation about writing center space, in the seven years since Grutsch McKinney’s publication, the community appears to be only slightly more attentive to the complexities of space. For example, at the 2010 International Writing Centers Association/National Conference on Peer Tutoring, sessions like “Creating Safe Cultural, Emotional, and Physical Spaces for Diverse Students” addressed questions such as “Does the physical arrangement make the center accessible?” and, “Can a center’s decorations offend someone’s culture?” (Smith, Lessner, Childers, Conard-Salvo, and Severe). But, in other sessions like “The Writing Center Space: Is your Center Designed to be a Safe Harbor” (Wysocki) and “Sea Change: The Importance of Space in the Writing Center” (Morgan), the emphasis on “new and creative design” that facilitates the overarching goals of a writing center or “sprucing up” a writing center, suggests that an emphasis on a center’s affective dimensions still dominate the conversation. We find further evidence in publically available, posted images on Facebook:

## The HWC, your home away from home.

By The Hume Writing Center at Stanford University · View Photos



Like

Location

Margaret Jacks Hall.

Undated

The HWC (Hume Writing Center), Your Home Away From Home

### WVU Writing Center's Photos - Wall Photos

Photo 1 of 2 · [Back to Album](#) · [WVU Writing Center's Photos](#) · [WVU Writing Center's Profile](#)

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The West Virginia University Writing Center

[For a further discussion of this image, see our section: How does social practice shape space?](#)

Both of the above images deliberately hearken to the idea of home. The Hume Writing Center album positions the writing center as “home” via the facebook photo album title, while the West Virginia University Writing Center suggests home by staging a family Christmas photo within the space of the writing center.

### The Politics of Writing Center as Location

In her 2004 *Academic Exchange Quarterly* article, “The Politics of Writing Center as Location” Melissa Nicolas takes the physical space conversation in a different direction: writing center space is indicative of power and access to capital. Nicolas argued that:

...the spaces we occupy, or the lack of space for us to occupy, is more than a problem of limited resources . . . Since campus real estate at most institutions is at a premium, occupying a real physical space sends a message to the campus community that who or what inhabits that space is important enough to garner a piece of this limited resource since space connotes the power and the value attached to who or what occupies it. (para. 8)

Nicolas’ text is largely a narrative about her experiences at an institution where the writing center was attached to one person—embodied by a woman who tutored students, and when she went on maternity leave, the center ceased to exist. Nicolas calls on the writing center community to be attentive to space because “Not having a room to label ‘the writing center’,” or having a writing center filled with broken chairs and outdated equipment conveys a powerful message about the value an institution assigns to its writing center” (para. 4). Nicolas’ words prompt us to revisit [Stone and Larsen’s WLN texts](#) – Stone’s ability to configure the writing center space as she saw fit, her access to an abundance of soft money and Larsen’s comment regarding the privilege of space: those blessed with choice and money versus those who have inherited “shabby back room[s]. . . full of old socks and jocks” (p. 4). They also force us to acknowledge that while 25 years has elapsed between the articles, the issues regarding writing center power and institutional legitimacy – as evidenced through space – still persist.

The WLN texts juxtaposed with Nicolas’ text suggest that writing centers are always at once in peril and in celebration.

Examples of peril can be seen in the following articles that chronicle the recent budget crisis and its decimating effects on writing centers:



## Ten WCU employees lose jobs to budget cuts

Posted on [March 18, 2011](#) by [Justin Caudell](#)

Ten Western Carolina University employees received notification that their jobs would be eliminated at or before April 1 and 15 more will be cut in the upcoming months as part of the university's efforts to deal with the projected loss of approximately \$8.6 million in state funding for the 2011-12 fiscal year.

Among those let go in this first wave are eight staff employees (subject to the State Personnel Act, or SPA) and two administrative employees (exempt from the State Personnel Act, or EPA)—are employed in several divisions across the university. The positions that were eliminated ranged from a university mechanic to the director of the campus writing center.

All of the individuals whose jobs are being eliminated will receive severance pay, if applicable, pay for unused vacation and bonus leave, and 12 months of health insurance coverage. Those subject to the State Personnel Act also will receive priority re-employment rights at any state agency for one year.

Barbara Hardie, the Director of the [Writing Center](#) at WCU, said she was informed verbally by her supervisor that her position would be part of the campus-wide job eliminations on Feb. 16 and was released from her duties at the beginning of March.

Hardie had been employed by WCU since 1992, starting as a part-time English instructor and working her way up to Director of the Writing Center in 2000.

"I was as much at risk as anybody, but I didn't anticipate my specific position being cut. In truth, I considered the Writing Center and our services part of the 'academic core,'" Hardie said.

She is grieving for being let go from the center because she cared for it as if was her own child, but is also angry at the administration and is not hiding it.

"When I first walked into the center, it looked like a doctor's office, clinical and uninviting—the ficus tree was dying," Hardie said. "I turned my attention to my new mission as I would an abandoned child—nurturing her, strengthening him. I now feel as

## Math, writing centers wary of cuts

By Kevin Drescher || February 03, 2010



Tags: [Math Center](#) [Writing Centers](#)



Officials with the Math Assistance Center and the Writing Center are sitting tight while Interim University President Kathy Wilbur flirts with budget cuts,

“The problem is that we just don’t know,” said Mary Ann Crawford, director of the Writing Center and a professor of English. “The Writing Center works on a tight budget already. So any cuts will affect the Writing Center.”

Reggie Becker, director of the Math Assistance Center, also is waiting for the announcement of a change-up in funds.

With Wilbur asking for departmental reports with scenarios of 3, 6 and 9 percent cuts prepared for her review, Crawford said if it happens, students on staff will be affected.

“With a staff of mainly students, its not like we can consolidate,” she said.

At the same time, we have seen examples of new, robust or reconfigured writing centers. The recent opening of Eastern Kentucky University’s [Noel Studio for Academic Creativity](#) is the most recent and most striking example.

### Future Spaces

In September 2009, ECU began chronicling the construction of the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity on a [wordpress blog](#). Russell Carpenter, the Studio Director also made announcements about the blog on W-center and sent repeated updates so that subscribers could see his space progress and even attend the center’s live dedication:

dedication--live feed! 2010-10-26 08:40:56 <Carpenter, Russell>

Dear Colleagues,

I’ve had some great conversations with many of you about writing center spaces. We’re lucky to have a new one that opened earlier this semester. Now we’ve installed technology and some amazing local art and are ready to move forward. We’re doing our dedication ceremony this Friday to honor the donors who’ve helped to make the new space so impressive. I thought some of you might be interested in watching live at <http://mpc.eku.edu/noel/>. We’re going kick off the ceremony at 1:30. A bit more info here too: <http://www.prm.eku.edu/Update/?issue=149&department=0&article=1959>.

Hope you’re having a great semester—

Rusty (W-Center post 2010-10-26 08:40:56).

According to an ECU press release, the Studio was the result of a 1 million-plus gift which:

offers a variety of spaces that allow students to develop their communication skills through critical and creative thinking: invention spaces where ideas are born, presentation practice rooms, a presentation suite for delivering and refining oral communication, breakout spaces for spontaneous collaborative group work or creative work with manipulatives, conference space for networking with colleagues on campus and remotely along with practicing and capturing group dynamics, and a discovery classroom for orientations, guest speakers, conferences, and instruction sessions.

The Noel Studio is rather unlike any of the other writing centers we have reviewed thus far. It offers multiple spaces within a space: invention spaces, presentation spaces, breakout spaces, conference spaces, and classroom spaces. Because of its focus on communication across the curriculum – in all of its multi-modal forms – during her 2010 IWCA/NCPTW keynote address, Andrea Lunsford called it the future of writing centers. Indeed, the studio's physical space evokes the future. The center is brightly lit; the ceilings high; the furnishings are ergonomic and in Danish modern style. Computers, large plasma screens, and presentation hardware and software are featured. This place is a departure from long-standing conceptions of writing center spaces, and is decidedly *nothing like home*.



Noel Studio, Center for Academic Creativity

In addition, this space is not counter-institutional as writing centers have traditionally positioned themselves. In fact, because the Noel Studio is directly connected to the university's strategic plan, specifically EKU's Quality Enhancement Plan ([QEP](#)) and a focused university-wide initiative to "develop informed, critical and creative thinkers who communicate effectively" (<http://www.studio.eku.edu/>), it is hyper-institutional.

### **The Writing Center Through a Spatial Rhetorical Lens**

As we reviewed the WLN profiles, *Writing Centers in Context*, "Leaving Home Sweet Home" and "The Politics of Writing Center as Location," and the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity, we found ourselves returning to two questions: 1) how does the writing center space affect social practice? and 2) how does social practice shape the writing center space? What follows is our response to those questions, using theories of space and place.

How does space affect social practice?

In asking how space affects social practice, we do not suggest that space is neutral or that it is divorced from behavior. We fully acknowledge that human interaction changes space – something that we discuss more fully below. However, we also need to acknowledge that various structural parameters—for example, location and access to capital—constrain what is possible within a physical space. These constraints are a space's resultant habitus, or "structures independent of the consciousness and will of agents" (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 14). According to Bourdieu, habitus consists of "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (1977, p. 72). In short, forces (structures) outside of an agent's control inevitably affect what is real and what is possible in a particular environment.

Three of our reviewed texts explicitly point to a writing center's habitus: Stone's "English Learning Center at Del Mar College" in the WLN, Nicolas' "The Politics of Location," and The Noel Studio web texts. Stone's WLN piece and The Noel Studio pages, while decades apart—share a similar habitus. The Del Mar Center and The Noel Studio are both technological marvels for their time – the Del Mar Center having Wollensak Tape Players, Sawyer Slide Projectors, CTR terminals, and an IBM 3278, model 2, and the Noel Studio having a CopyCam system, articulating monitors, touch-screen technology, and video equipment. Both have fairly large sums of seed money, but their spaces' missions are directly tied to larger institutional structures. For the Del Mar Center, the connection is implicit. The very specific function of this center is likely connected to the era of Open Admissions and the university's desire to remediate and therefore retain a new population of students. The funding helps the center serve its primary remediating function. The Noel Studio is directly connected EKU's QEP, and a "focused university-wide initiative to develop informed, critical and creative thinkers who communicate effectively" (<http://www.studio.eku.edu/>).

Centers so closely tied to an institution's mission and/or strategic plan retain symbolic capital, particularly when juxtaposed with the one-person center Nicolas describes. However, such capital-rich sites are also under more institutional scrutiny and pressure to perform/conform to institutional learning outcomes – outcomes that are a distance from writing centers' liberatory

past. Here, we nod to Tilly Warnock and John Warnock's canonical "Liberatory Writing Centers: Restoring Authority to Writers" (1984). In their article, Warnock and Warnock saw writing centers as "risk taking operations" (p. 23) where students could act on their own critical consciousness and revise themselves in the world: two outcomes that are immeasurable in the context of institutional assessment. According to Warnock and Warnock, centers are liberatory *because* they exist on the fringes of the academy: "often in unused classrooms, old barracks, and basements" (p. 23).

We note the inherent paradox. Centers with more institutional status and power are under more rigid control, but they are more permanent structures; whereas centers with less power and status may operate under the radar and therefore can be more experimental and liberatory. Despite this freedom, they are also the most susceptible to staffing issues, economic crises, fund reallocations, and a host of other institutional forces outside of a center's control.

How does social practice shape space?

Just as space shapes practice, so does practice shape space. Edward Soja's conceptions of thirdspace help us understand the multidirectional relationship among place, history, and ideas. According to Soja ("Afterword," 1996). "We traditionally tend to think about space in two ways, one as concrete material forms, empirically expressed geographies; and the other as a more mental construct, as imagined geographies. Stated differently, the first involves things in space, the second *thoughts* about space" (p. 1426). In his book *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Spaces* (1996), Soja argued against such binary thinking and instead encourages us to consider a "third alternative that combines both the 'real' empirical geographies and the conceived of 'imagined' geographies in a much broader notion of *lived space*" (p. 1426). Thirdspace, or lived space, is the union between first space: "a material and materialized 'physical' spatiality that is directly comprehended in empirically measurable *configurations*" and second space: "conceived ideas about space" (p. 10).

When we apply Soja's ideas to our review, we note several texts that address writing centers only as first or real space. The WLN texts, *Writing Centers in Context*, and the Noel Studio web texts primarily identify the center as material, noting: room layout, location, decorative features, technology, budgets as well as other material realities not emphasized in this review such as staffing or tutor training. These texts also identify writing centers as second/conceived spaces, informed by philosophies regarding comfort-and-learning as well as trends in higher education (Open Admissions, QEPs, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacy).

If thirdspace is place and idea enacted, then Nicolas and Grutsch McKinney provide the most complete portraits of writing centers as thirdspace because they challenge readers to examine their everyday practices in a given space and call into question the beliefs that inform their actions and ideas about the writing center. Nicolas' thirds the writing center when she treats it as real-and-imagined, location-and-concept. She explains, that writing center as concept divorced from space -- a moveable feast (Sunstein), a place to talk about ideas (North), a method (Boquet)--undermines a writing center's institutional value. She argued that writing center as concept cannot supersede writing center as location: "Writing center space is political,

invested with meaning, and most clearly, a physical manifestation of often unspoken attitudes about writing center work and writing center workers” (para 9).

Grutsch McKinney’s approach to writing center as thirdspace also begins with center as concept – the home metaphor – then she discusses actual center usage. In other words, she examined how the metaphor plays out in material space and affects the users (staff and students). In her analysis, she asks an important question: “...if a writing center is a home, whose home is it? Mine? Yours? For whom is it comfortable?” (p. 16). She continues, “Like it or not, when we fill our writing centers with touches of home, we may be marking it as familiar and comfortable for directors and tutors – often . . . of a certain class (upper or middle) and cultural background” (p. 16). In short, our intent to make our centers comfortable for students might backfire given their individual lived experiences with home.

Nedra Reynolds (2003), also shed some light on the metaphors that are repeatedly reproduced in educational environments: “We should be asking how metaphors result from, rather than simply shape, our experience in the material world . . . we need to understand more about the embodied activity and situated experience that leads to our dependence on and reproduction of spatial metaphors that so often characterize writing and learning” (p. 46). To a great extent, Grutsch McKinney helps us understand how the home metaphor helped the writing center community construct an identity distinct from (and in our assessment, counter to) the traditional classroom. However, we also posit that the metaphor helped (and perhaps still helps) centers mediate their location. For example, if a center is located in a less than desirable space, like a basement in an old building, those who work at the center might attempt to transform the space into a something that makes the location livable or even comforting and nostalgic. The (mostly white and middle/upper middle class writing center staff) here attempts to mediate a space and connect it to something with which they already have an affinity.

In her analysis, Grutsch McKinney argued that the home metaphor best serves the writing center staff and that the metaphor may be in disservice to other users of the space: students. However, we disagree with some of her conclusions. We end our review section with a nod to contemporary writing centers that deliberately invoke the home metaphor (including our own). The home/comfort metaphors still persist—even after Grutsch McKinney challenged the writing center community to reconsider them—largely because the writing center staff, not the students, represent the predominant users/occupiers of the space. Consider the following: a high volume writing center may log 4,000 contact hours, or 4,000 one-on-one sessions, with students in a given semester, and may have a staff of 40 peer tutors (note: 4,000 sessions does not equal 4,000 students, and many students will be repeat visitors to a center). Those 40 peer tutors spend more cumulative time at the writing center than the students who receive tutoring. In short, the design of the space may have less of an impact on the student who is passing through than it does on the tutor and director who actually *live* in the center.

From the student-user perspective, the center then may be more akin to a non-place. First coined by Melvin Webber (1964), non-places were marked by access rather than proximity. According to Webber, the necessary conditions for community were once: a “sense of belonging, a body of shared values, a system of logical organization, and interdependency of

spatial proximity” (p. 109). However, he saw community as becoming less place bound and more conceptual or interest bound, and because communities were no longer determined by place, ideas could proliferate (Arefi, 1999). Since Webber first defined the non-place, the concept has been taken up and extended most notably by Marc Augé. Augé argues that while non-places are not bound to time or region, they also do not provide their inhabitants with any sense of identity, community, or tradition. Non-places begin with “unrootedness or detachment” (Augé, 2000, p.9). They are not conceptual spaces, but rather transient, temporal, and intermediary: the spaces in-between places like airports, malls, waiting rooms. However, a non-place is also not fixed. It “comes into existence when humans don’t recognize themselves in it”, or cease to recognize themselves in it or have yet to recognize themselves in it (p.9). It is also possible for a space to be looked upon “as a place by some people and a non-place by others, on a long-term or a short-term basis” (p. 9).

And while there isn’t a direct parallel, for many students, the writing center may have qualities of a non-place, particularly for those students who just pass through as they fulfill their university writing requirement. These students do not develop lasting relationships with others in the center, and they develop no place attachment or emotional linkage to the physical site (Milligan, 2003). As writing center professionals so deeply tied to the writing center as place, it’s difficult for us to imagine that some students see the center as an institutional space among many non-places of their everyday, but we contend that seeing the writing center through the eyes of a passerby adds new layers of dimension to our conceptions of what is real and what is possible within the center. For example, if we examine writing centers through the lens of non-place, how might that inform our usage data? Might it help us better design studies that get at why some students only use the writing center once or why many students never use the writing center at all? Might it help us get at other questions regarding a student’s place attachment to the center and the likelihood of retention? How might it help us navigate our writing center identities – especially as we look towards the spaces we occupy on-line?

## A Foyeristic View of OWLs

Throughout the 80s and much of the early 90s the discussion surrounding computers and writing centers was largely focused on the computer as a free-standing, static tool. While as early as 1979 arguments were being made about the consequences of digital technology on writing centers, it was not until the late 80s that scholars began regularly discussing the unique pedagogical opportunities that computers presented. As scholars explored the potential of computers beyond the early debate between tutorial programs and one-on-one tutoring (Epes, 1979; Veit, 1979; Southwell, 1983; Kemp, 1987), articles that discussed how word processing programs impacted student composition and revision practices began to appear (Serico, 1986; Farrell, 1987; Luchte, 1987; Scharon, 1989). These early discussions recognized that computers changed “the way we teach, tutor, and write” (Luchte, 1987, p. 11). While valuable work in this vein has continued and evolved (Simmons, 1995; Buck, 2008), the scholarship often situates computers within the kinds of preexisting environments discussed in our section on physical space.

This section provides some background on the conversations that surround online writing centers. That said, isolating scholarship that considers the spatial relationship writing centers have with technology proved more difficult than in our section on physical centers. In her review of *The OWL Construction and Maintenance Guide*, Mary Wislocki stated, “Just skimming through the CD, I was struck by the unusual mix of texts and seemingly incompatible viewpoints” (2003, p. 71). This sentiment is both visible in and echoed by some of the scholars we discuss. Additionally, the material realities of many writing centers in terms of their access to new technology and the tendency for scholarship to address logistical issues as much as theoretical issues, creates a uniquely recursive body of writing. As we discussed how best to organize this section of the review, there were certain texts that seemed important to reference for historical reasons, others for theoretical reasons, and still others to highlight some of the trends in how writing centers are manipulating virtual space.

The following section is divided into two large subsections, each of which could easily be subdivided and further expanded. The first subsection, “[1995: A Watershed Moment for the Convergence of Digital Space and Writing Centers](#),” charts the history of online writing centers up to, and particularly focusing on, 1995. As the title would indicate, in this section of our review we propose that 1995 marked a tipping point in writing center scholarship where online environments became an unavoidable consideration for how scholars conceive of space and place. The second subsection, “[Who’s Who from the Foyer: An Eclectic Approach to OWL Scholarship](#),” addresses some of the scholarship following 1995 that we found to be most compelling when considered spatially. As a result, the historiography in this section is notably looser than in the first.<sup>[i]</sup> Finally, in “[Locating the Digital Writing Center](#),” we revisit some of the articles that were discussed in the previous two sections, examining them through a critical spatial lens.

### **1995: A Watershed Moment for the Convergence of Digital Space and Writing Centers**

Recognizing the problems inherent in any attempt to isolate and imbue a particular year with such significance, we begin by clarifying that it is not our intention to diminish the importance of online work prior to 1995. While the term OWL (On Line Writing Lab) was not added to the writing center lexicon until the early 1990’s, writing centers had established an online presence as early as 1986 (Brown, 2000, p. 19). In 1987, Joyce Kinkead first noted the benefits of e-mail for classrooms and writing centers. It was precisely because e-mail changed the dynamics of



space and time, by allowing writing centers to provide asynchronous tutoring, that Kinkead saw it as particularly beneficial for non-traditional or for timid students. The following year, in an article in *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, Kinkead (1988) added ESL students to the list of those who most directly stood to benefit, while she explicitly made the claim that “electronic tutoring ... combats the problems of *time* and *distance* [emphasis added] for students needing tutorial help” (p. 5). However, in her 1990 article “What’s Up and What’s In: Trends and Traditions in Writing Centers,” Muriel Harris made no mention of computers – let alone online tutoring – nor were either discussed in Ray Wallace and Jeanne Simpson’s edited collection *The Writing Center: New Directions*, which was released in 1991.

It is worth remembering that comparatively few writing centers had computers and, of those that did, even fewer had online access. In 1990 Tim Berners-Lee was still developing HTTP, URL, and HTML software code at CERN so the possibilities for online writing centers was still limited (Greenemeier, 2009). Even those centers that had the necessary time, skills, and resources to create an online presence faced serious setbacks. For example, between 1990 and 1991, Lady Falls Brown constructed an online writing center at Texas Tech, but Brown’s OWL was “reluctantly ended ... because of the difficulties caused by inadequate technology” (Brown, 2000, pp. 21-22). While initially short-lived, Texas Tech reestablished its OWL in 1996, and it is possible to see in her initial effort both the frustration with, and the growing desire for, online writing centers by many writing center scholars.

By 1993 David Coogan had established an OWL at SUNY Albany, and a year later his article “Towards a Rhetoric of On-line Tutoring” was published in *The Writing Lab Newsletter*. However, it wasn’t until 1995 that “E-mail Tutoring, a New Way to Do New Work,” his more substantive piece on the topic, was published in *Computers and Composition*. Also appearing in that issue was Richard Selfe’s “Surfing the Tsunami: Electronic Environments in the Writing Center,” which presented a warning to writing center practitioners to engage with electronic resources in order to “avoid the destructive power” of the larger, unmediated technocentrism that was rapidly developing within universities (p. 318). Selfe, not unlike Kinkead, argued the merits of an online presence in spatial terms. He included: an e-mail from David Coogan that discussed how that the conventional writing center might be, in the broadest sense, too noisy for students with learning disabilities; national statistics were used to show the substantial number of non-fulltime students, thereby implying this might change if more online courses and support were made available; and mobility issues were considered for (able-bodied) students. Given that the article was framed as a warning it also reinforces Moore’s law and the importance of this moment in writing center history. Having begun the article in 1994, in his postscript Selfe acknowledged that, by the time the article was published, the wave had “washed over us already” (p. 318).

Additional support for the claim Selfe makes in his postscript can be seen in the number and breadth of articles published on this topic in 1995.<sup>[ii]</sup> One example, “From the (Writing) Center to the Edge: Moving Writers Along the Internet,” was written by Muriel Harris who had just launched Purdue’s OWL earlier that year. In this article she noted the ability of Purdue’s OWL to serve students asynchronously both through e-mail and the availability of its online writing resources. Additionally, she outlined other centers that were using synchronous online tutoring through MOOs such as [Missouri University’s Online Writery](#).

While she did not mention computers or digital innovation as either a trend or tradition in 1990, in “Online Writing Labs (OWLs): A Taxonomy of Options and Issues” (1995), the first line states, “Writing centers using computers are not a new phenomenon,” before going on to state that “extending tutorial services by going online is ...” (sic, p. 145). This article, co-authored by

Michael Pemberton, catalogs the relative merits and potential hazards of various OWL designs. To help address potential logistical questions, they not only reference their own respective OWLs ([Purdue](#) and [University of Illinois](#)), but also the online writing centers at other universities such as the [University of Richmond](#), the [University of Texas at Austin](#), the [University of Delaware](#), the [University of Minnesota](#), [SUNY-Albany](#), and the [University of Missouri at Columbia](#). They even provide brief descriptions of some OWLs that were, for one reason or another, non-operational such as [Kennesaw State College](#) (in development) and [City College of New York](#) (non-operational due to funding and software issues). In addition to providing technical information, Harrison and Pemberton reiterate and expand on the list of potential students who stand to benefit from an online writing center. They also advise readers to recognize online environments as distinct spaces with operational capabilities and objectives that are different from the physical center.

Perhaps the article from this scholarship that is most directly relevant to our current review is Dave Healy's "From Place to Space: Perceptual and Administrative Issues in the Online Writing Center," (1995). As Healy presented it, with so much scholarship debating the particulars of their physical locations, "online conferencing has implications that extend beyond the dynamics of the tutorial itself, including issues that get at the heart of what a writing center is" (pp. 183-184). Healy draws parallels between the interest some directors expressed in decentralizing their writing centers and OWLs; however, he is quick to note that, while they may serve similar aims, having additional, physical centers attached to other schools or in residence halls is markedly different than online centers. The movement to other locations remains place-bound, a movement from "'our' turf to our clients turf," where online tutoring becomes a movement away from place and into space (p. 184). Healy also recognizes that online tutoring creates the potential for greater observation of tutoring practices. Drawing on Foucault, Healy questions the panoptic impact of digital tutoring and the way that self-monitoring might eliminate tutors' willingness to take risks during sessions (pp. 189-190). Healy concludes his article by stating that online writing centers represent a "window of opportunity" (p. 192). At the same time, given the potential for online tutoring to take on dystopian features, he remains guarded in his optimism.

### **Who's Who from the Foyer: An Eclectic Approach to OWL Scholarship**

Following the surge of scholarship in 1995, the inaugural issue of *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* published a "[cover story](#)" dedicated to OWLs.[iii] Most of the five OWL-specific articles appear to have functioned primarily as FAQs for uninitiated readers.

In "[Writing Spaces: Technoprovocateurs and OWLs in the Late Age of Print](#)" (1996), J. Paul Johnson argued that most online writing centers replicate and "promote" a conception of literacy that is heavily invested in print culture. While these centers function as online "pointers" toward their physical centers, Johnson provided a brief explanation of how some online writing centers take advantage of the dynamic and subversive opportunities that are possible in digital space.[iv] While Johnson's article can be seen as celebratory, Camille Langston's "[Resistance and Control: The Complex Process of Creating an OWL](#)" (1996) provided a cautionary tale of her own experience creating an online writing center at Texas Women's University. Jane Lasarenko's "[PR\(OWL\)ING AROUND: A OWL by Any Other Name](#)" (1996) provided a list of "OWL-Lets" and "Full-Fledged OWLs," while Susan Moody's "[OWLs and ESL Students](#)" (1996) offered a hyperlinked list, along with brief evaluations, of OWLs that provided resources

specifically for ESL students. [v] However, of the articles from this issue, the most frequently referenced is Stuart Blythe's "[Why OWLs? Value, Risk, and Evolution.](#)"

In this article, Blythe provided reasons for and against OWLs. In general, Blythe's article does a summarized the range of costs and benefits tied to online writing centers, many of which remain relevant and worth considering even as the presence of OWLs, and the relevant scholarship about them, has dramatically expanded. Among the reasons Blythe provided in favor of OWLs is their ability to help address the limitations of time and space, referencing both Jennifer Jordan-Henley and Barry Maids' CyberTutor Project and the *Writing Lab Newsletter* article by Kinkead that was mentioned earlier.[vi] Other potential benefits included how online environments might change the dynamics of tutoring and how they might provide increased visibility and credibility to writing centers. Considering that much of his article works at gathering and summarizing discussions that were already circulating within the writing center community, the most noteworthy section of this article is its conclusion. While most of the preceding articles provide conclusions that ask for continued, critical consideration of digital technology, this section, Blythe's is the first to offer a more sustained meta-analysis of what that means.

In his closing section Blythe begins two discussions, both of which outline triadic theories of technology. In the more immediately spatial of the two discussions, Blythe argued for recognition of the various levels of computer operation: computer as tool, computer as environment, and computer as medium. Of these three levels, perhaps the easiest—or most immediate—way to view computers is as a tool. This level recognizes computers as objects that are useful in performing design, composition, and data organization tasks. Looking back to the introduction of the present text, we can see this view that dominated early writing center scholarship on computers. At the second level, computer as environment, Blythe (1996, "We should consider how we talk about computers," para. 3) stated that computers can be seen "as a virtual space, a space into which we project ourselves." As Blythe presented it, digital environments can be thought of as parallel to physical environments. The final level is that of computer as medium. Here Blythe argued for a conception of computers where the functional and environmental intersect. By looking at computers at this level, "each application of computer technology creates a medium that, through the arrangement of tools and space, enables certain practices while suppressing others" (Blythe, 1996, "We should consider how we talk about computers," para. 4) Importantly, Blythe argued that a failure to make these distinctions limits our ability for (constructive) dialogue.[vii]

Blythe (1997) addressed the other closing discussion in more detail a year later in his *Writing Center Journal* article, "Networked Computers + Writing Centers = ? Thinking About Networked Computers In Writing Center Practice". Recognizing a contradictory tendency in some of the past scholarship, Blythe reiterates the importance of critically engaging technology through a theoretical lens, noting that there is no such thing as an atheoretical approach to technology. Emphasizing theory as a tool for navigating "this new electronic frontier," he returns to Feenberg's *Critical Theory of Technology* and elaborates on the distinctions between instrumental, substantive, and critical theories of technology that were briefly outlined in the previous article, arguing more explicitly for a critical theory of technology (p. 93).

Blythe explains how both the medium and tools affect actions, and he presents instrumentalist assumptions about naively or strategically viewing technology as "value-free" and relatively unobtrusive both individually and institutionally. Blythe offers instead, a substantive theory of technology that recognizes technology as both produced by and producing culture, and therefore places far greater importance on recognizing technology as ideological. However, Blythe still sees this stance relegating technological decisions within a binary response framework: either way "one is left with a take-it-or-leave-it decision" (p. 102). A critical theory of

technology, on the other hand, “acknowledges the cultural influence of technology while looking for a way to do something about it” (p. 102). By contextualizing the perceived need that produced technology, it is possible to more accurately assess the inherent biases; while, at the same time, a critical approach to technology allows for “the redesign and readaptation of technology for democratic purposes” (p. 103). Having presented the value of a critical theory of technology, Blythe acknowledges the questions left unanswered and presents some tactics to begin thinking about redesigning technologies. However, while there is overlap between the two triadic theories, Blythe does not return to the more decidedly spatial triadic theory outlined in his previous article.

In terms of the logistical scholarship for online writing centers, the turn of the century marks the period that Richard Selfe’s electronic tsunami appears to have crested. After performing an informal survey, Eric Crump reported that he found over 250 OWLs in 1998, compared to the handful that he claims were available in 1993 (2000, p. 224). The 2000 Spring/Summer issue of *The Writing Center Journal* provided a fairly accurate report with forward-looking articles by Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, Muriel Harris, and Joyce Kinkead and Jeanette Harris. All mentioned the importance of writing centers having an online presence, with Muriel Harris’ nine-page article logging the word “online” over thirty times. James Inman and Donna Sewell’s *Taking Flight with OWLs: Examining Electronic Writing Center Work* was published that year, and two years earlier, Eric Hobson published his award-winning *Wiring the Writing Center*. Finally, by 2003, Routledge releases James Inman and Clint Gardner’s CD-ROM, *The OWL Construction and Maintenance Guide*. All this scholarly work lends a certain amount of credence to Michael Pemberton’s comment that “online writing labs have become the norm rather than the exception” (2004, p. 14). However, as Crump was quick to point out, a closer look at many of his survey sites uncovered OWLs whose online services were limited or non-existent (p. 225).

In her article “The Idea(s) of an Online Writing Center: In Search of a Conceptual Model” (2005), Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch recognized this spectrum among OWLs. Similar to Stuart Blythe, she also noted the contradictions that can arise within OWL scholarship. Comparing OWL scholarship to face-to-face writing center scholarship, she observed that, unlike physical writing centers, OWLs do not appear to “share a common model” (p. 21). To further explore this phenomenon, Kastman Breuch argued that it is useful to view “the idea of the writing center” as a conceptual model (p. 22). Drawing from Donald Norman’s *The Design of Everyday Things*, Kastman Breuch explains that “conceptual models help us understand the way things are supposed to work as well as provide explanations for when things don’t work” (p. 22). She then states that conceptual models are extremely important in online environments since “we cannot tangibly touch or see the object with which we interact” (p. 23). Functioning as metaphors, conceptual models help by linking new technological experiences with familiar physical experiences. As examples of how conceptual models work, she provides the commonly experienced trashcan icons on personal computers and shopping carts on e-commerce websites (p. 23). Because of the connection between conceptual models and previous experiences, Kastman Breuch established what she saw as the dominant conception of writing center work in physical environments. Ultimately, Kastman Breuch (2005, p.22) views “the most powerful ‘Idea’ or conceptual model of writing center work” as a Burkean Parlor that combines elements of Stephen North’s “The Idea of a Writing Center” (1984) and Andrea Lunsford’s “Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center” (1991). Finally, drawing on David Coogan’s *Electronic Writing Centers* (1999), she shows how “the Burkean Parlor has emerged as the ideal for online writing centers as well” (Kastman Breuch, 2005, p. 28).

Having established her claim that conceptual models are always present, Kastman Breuch explains why the Burkean Parlor does not readily transfer to online environments and why that

can produce frustration among writing center theorists and practitioners. She argues that this conceptual model fails because of the inability to recreate a physical space and face-to-face tutoring behaviors in virtual spaces. Making the same place/space distinction as Dave Healy (1995), Kastman Breuch briefly explores the ways that writing centers have tried to address the shift from *place* to *space* as they enter digital environments (p. 29). Less specific in her explanation than Healy, Kastman Breuch still argues that virtual environments shape behavior and, “might feel abnormal to us because the same kind of nondirective, conversational, and reflective listening behaviors we know so well don’t apply as easily to online writing centers” (p. 31). Having noted how even synchronous online tutoring does not mirror the social dynamics of face-to-face tutoring and that place-based metaphors and images of couches do not bridge the gap between physical and virtual centers, Kastman Breuch forwards the notion that the “Idea” of an online writing center can be usefully reconfigured into multiple, contextually driven “ideas” (p. 33). She concludes the article by demonstrating how online spaces can become places by using the Online Writery and Colorado State’s Writing Studio as examples. Given what she highlighted about these environments, and addressed more abstractly in her conclusion, what appears to have drawn Kastman Breuch to these centers is their ability to match their spatial metaphors to the services they provide, to recognize the limitations and potential of their online environments, their ability to help orient users to their distinct centers, and to maintain some connection to the ideals of the Burkean Parlor.

A more recent article that attempts to account for space within online tutoring is Melanie Yergeau, Katie Wozniak, and Peter Vandenberg’s [“Expanding the Space of f2f: Writing Centers and Audio-Video-Textual Conferencing”](#) (2008). As Jackie Grutsch McKinney notes in the *WLN*, “arguments for online tutoring, synchronous or not, have been made frequently over the last fifteen years, what is different about this piece is an emphasis on what they called ‘audio-video-textual conferencing’ or AVT tutoring” (2010, p. 11). The article implicitly justifies placing AVT tutoring as “an alternative to email-based tutoring,” rather than in conversation with other forms of synchronous tutoring by presenting a number of sources that represent e-mail tutoring and online tutoring as synonymous. Yergeau, Wozniak, and Vandenberg then present some of the problems peer tutors are likely to face when conducting sessions through e-mail. These problems include: an inability to maintain a critical understanding of the space, difficulty expressing their ideas clearly or empathetically, and/or a tendency to *perform* academic writing rather than maintaining the conversational tone of a face-to-face session. However, Yergeau, Wozniak, and Vandenberg are careful to maintain a theoretical space that does not unnecessarily foreclose tutoring options. The authors also note that:

At the same time that we revel in the recomposition of f2f via AVT, we want to avoid an attitude of naïve nostalgia; the suggestion of immediacy is never immediacy, and we stand to profit from a consistent awareness of the ways in which this new technology mediates our relationships with students and our own roles and identities ... both users, in order to maintain their dialogue, must work through the technology that separates them; they must operate a machine and maneuver through dialog boxes and windows, punch buttons and touch pads and mice—simply to hear a reassuring laugh or to see a confused and wrinkled brow. (Yergeau et al., 2008, “+scholarship,” p. 3)

As such, the authors present technology in this instance as simultaneously transparent and opaque. One way in which the authors recognize that AVT mediates the tutor-student relationship is in terms of *seeing* face-to-face tutoring across physical boundaries. In the article, the authors are careful to note that, while AVT technology allows students and tutors to maintain a recognition and sensitivity toward difference as a result of the video component, because these sessions are now likely to enter the domestic space of students, visual markers of class

may become increasingly visible. Additionally, Yergeau, Wozniak, and Vandenberg (2008, “+space,” p. 2) note that tutors might experience variable levels of comfort both with technology and the location of the student, with one potential outcome being an overly informal session where “roommates, children, parents, or spouses may wander in or interrupt; the TV or radio may be turned on; the student/consultant may be sipping a cup of coffee or munching on a sandwich.” Echoing sentiments similar to that of Kastman Breuch, the authors conclude the article without making sweeping generalizations about the potential for AVT technology. Instead, the technology is placed within the context of their own writing center and the particular problems they wished to address. As Grutsch McKinney notes at the close of her article, the differences between face-to-face tutoring and AVT tutoring should be recognized; however, operating with an awareness of what different technologies offer can be seen as an asset given the increasing need for a “plurality of approaches to support writing” (p. 12).

The last article that we look at in this review deals with tutoring in Second Life. While there are still other ways of tutoring online, Second Life provides writing center practitioners with a means to provide synchronous online tutoring that moves beyond text-based chat rooms. One recent article that addresses the possibilities of Second Life is Russell Carpenter and Meghan Griffin’s “Exploring Second Life: Recent Developments in Virtual Writing Centers” (2010). Unlike AVT tutoring, Second Life allows a corporeal form of synchronous tutoring to occur in a shared environment; however, for many writing centers the cost (even at discounted rates) would likely be prohibitive.[viii]

After providing an overview of [Second Life](#) and some of its current academic uses, the authors begin discussing the [University of Central Florida’s Second Life University Writing Center \(SLUWC\)](#). Itself a kind of overview, the authors address a range of issues and opportunities in a fairly rapid-fire manner. Echoing the comments of a number of tutors and directors at the 2010 IWCA-NCPTW Conference in Baltimore, Carpenter and Griffin provide an undergraduate perspective within the article that celebrates the virtual world and the tutoring opportunities available through Second Life. For example, according to Griffin, one undergraduate tutor claimed that the construction of the virtual environment made the space “seem legitimate as a place of learning” (p. 9).[ix]

Following the brief tour of the SLUWC, Carpenter and Griffin individually recounted their initial experiences with Second Life. Griffin, who was the less experienced of the two, begins by explaining how her avatar name did not conform to the expectations of the virtual world. The name, and her early inability to control her movement or navigate her environment, marked her as a recent immigrant to the virtual world. Importantly, Griffin notes that Second Life operates as “an identity economy,” and from the article one gets the sense that, in an environment where it is possible to “take the form of a white fox or dragon, or sport fairy wings and a tail,” few avatars are likely to be authentic reproductions of first-life bodies (p. 10). Earlier, the article stated that most tutors “put a great deal of thought into their appearance and the ethos their avatars would convey in online interactions” (p. 9). However, when this statement is juxtaposed with Griffin’s list, it is hard to gauge how ethos functions in Second Life.

The “essentially public” nature of Second Life, the authors noted, does raise potential issues in relation to privacy (pp. 10-12). To placate privacy concerns the authors revert back to the physical environment and asked readers to compare those interruptions to the kinds of events that take place in their physical centers. Here again, we can think about Second Life in comparison to AVT tutoring. While both platforms allow for synchronous tutoring, both have their own, unique potentials for the space to be disrupted.

## Locating the Digital Writing Center

Theoretical considerations of space in relation to online writing centers inevitably raise serious concerns for writing center practitioners. While some scholars are more explicit in their analysis of digital space, returning to the articles by Joyce Kinkead we can see how thinking about digital space has evolved. In her 1987 *College Composition and Communication* article, Kinkead explained the possible conception of the writing center as an intimidating environment for some students. As she explained it, the electronic tutoring system that she implemented was in direct response to students who “were unwilling to go to the Writing Center for additional help because they were ‘afraid to go through the door’” (pp. 339-340). Kinkead inferred that crossing the threshold of the writing center might be thought of as a forfeiture of personal space and/or intellectual ownership with “someone ‘breathing down their necks’” (p. 340). Nonetheless, keeping with the majority of scholarship on this subject, Kinkead did not see the online services as supplanting the physical center. Instead, the electronic tutor encouraged students to come to the physical center for additional help. When that was not possible, the electronic tutor seemed to offer heterotopic possibilities by allowing the center to be simultaneously nowhere and everywhere.

This idea was further developed in her *Writing Lab Newsletter* article the following year. Introducing narratives that rhetorically highlighted real-time and mobility constraints that some students face, Kinkead demonstrated how electronic tutoring could provide these students with services they might not otherwise be able to receive. She argued that the writing center’s mission to make education equally accessible was itself subject to spatio-temporal constraints given its hours of operation and physical location. With electronic tutoring, she stated:

The “time” problem is solved ... provided the writer doesn't need the advice quickly ... “distance” is no longer a problem either. If a student needing writing help lives in a campus dormitory or in a town 50 miles away, she can request help via phone line/modem and then pore over the response during rewriting stages. (p. 4)

By using narratives to construct users who as non-traditional, (temporarily) disabled, or non-native speakers, Kinkead appears acutely aware of the politics of both student and writing center locations.

The first article points toward the socio-spatial dialectic that occurs within writing centers, and the difficulty created in claiming the space as having a singular, fixed meaning. The second article, however, appears in some ways to remediate the physical space, by counting its shortcomings *and* solidifying spatial meaning, through claiming digital space. While Kinkead recognized that physical space cannot be divorced from students’ conceptions, because technology is thought of in relation to overcoming physical space, it is not itself spatialized. Instead, like many early scholars, Kinkead under theorizes digital space. In keeping with the common frontier metaphor, digital space is colonized by the writing center; it is presented as a location with valuable resources to be imported and traded, while avoiding the unequal distributions of power and knowledge that shapes who can access online environments. Additionally, many early scholars also failed to recognize the constructed and transported cultural practices that are inscribed into digital spaces and which identify and stratify users. Most, if not all, early scholarship regarding e-mail tutoring treated digital space as more or less neutral or transparent.[x]

In her book *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference* (2004), Nedra Reynolds notes how there is a persistent failure among some to recognize the substantive ways that e-mail differs from postal mail (pp. 20-21). According to Reynolds, failing to note these differences allows users to view e-mail as an essentially private mode of discourse (p. 20). As a result of naively mapping the physical over the digital there is a failure to reconfigure an appropriate spatial ethics. At the same time, an opposite impulse to treat digital space as wholly different from physical space allowed scholars like Kinkead to create writing center avatars, like "E.T." the Electronic Tutor, without fully considering the consequences.

While Stuart Blythe would later encourage a critical theory of technology to help writing center practitioners recognize the ways in which technology is always, already ideological, Cynthia Selfe's "Technology and Literacy: A Story about the Perils of Not Paying Attention" (1999a) and *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty First Century: The Importance of Paying Attention* (1999b) clearly challenged those continuing to operate under an instrumental theory of technology. While Kinkead never claimed that electronic tutoring would reach every student, because issues of race and class remain implicit in her texts, we suspect that some of the same students she talked about reaching would have been the least likely to have the necessary knowledge or access to take advantage of the service.

By 1995, Dave Healy addressed online writing centers through a more explicitly spatial lens in "From Place to Space: Perceptual and Administrative Issues in the Online Writing Center." Seeing physical, decentralized writing centers sharing certain underlying motivations with online writing centers, Healy is careful to avoid drawing parallels that would obscure the way in which online writing centers move the discussion from a previously place-based rhetoric to a discussion of space. However, despite the use of these terms, Healy does not seem overly invested in critically exploring their theoretical significance. It would appear to be enough that the reader will understand that "place" and "space" are distinct.

Focusing on writing center tutors, Healy looks at how online tutoring transforms the work in terms of time and professionalization. For Healy, the potential flexibility inherent in asynchronous tutoring has the capability to create logistical problems regarding where tutoring occurs and how hours are monitored. Issues of oversight then become more pronounced when tutoring is conducted online. In part, this is because Healy presents physical forms of observation as unobtrusive, pedagogical opportunities for tutors to learn from one another. The use of e-mail in the writing center, unlike for previous scholars, is predisposed to be both semi-public and permanent. Drawing on Foucault, Healy presents online tutoring as panoptic in nature, with tutors unable to determine when their sessions are being monitored; however, to the extent that Healy does not frame the physical center as a panoptic environment, the largest impediment for tutors taking the risks that Healy argues are valuable would have to come from the permanence of written sessions versus those that are carried out face-to-face. Healy then was able to take the same concern over representations of space that Kinkead had for the physical center and apply them to online environments. In closing, Healy focused on the need for more serious considerations of how human experiences shape online environments.

Ten years later, Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch furthers the conceptual investigation of writing centers and digital space in her article, "The Idea(s) of an Online Writing Center: In Search of a Conceptual Model" (2005). Recognizing what she sees as a tendency for physical metaphors and center-based theory to inform conceptions of online space, she questions the ultimate value of this approach. She argues:



Whether used in a metaphoric or more literal fashion, many online writing centers have borrowed the concepts of a writing center place to define their online presence, but most of the time it just isn't the same. Online, students are limited to what they can see and hear from a computer screen, so if students go online holding the same expectations of place for online writing centers as they do face-to-face writing centers (like sitting on a sofa rather than just looking at one), they will likely be disappointed. It is for these reasons that some scholars have suggested that online tutoring—particularly asynchronous or email tutoring—falls short of achieving this warm, inviting environment. (p. 30)

She sees the tension, therefore, as one in which online spaces attempt to conform to the physical parameters of tutoring. In an attempt to show how online centers can chart a new course, she works to highlight writing centers that she sees creating a unique sense of place that is appropriate to their online environments.

Functionally-oriented considerations of space might encourage OWLs to take advantage of the inherent disruption of sequential navigation that occurs for most students as they use the Internet. It is easy enough to imagine the creative use of hyperlinks, images, audio, video, web analytics, synchronous and asynchronous tutoring intersecting one another in ways that create “simultaneous relations and meanings that are tied together by a spatial rather than a temporal logic” (Soja, 1989, p. 1). Online writing centers that could achieve dynamic, contextually-driven websites that also maintained an appropriate level of built-in redundancy to accommodate the full range of learners and student approaches to technology, would appear to both physically *and* conceptually dwell in cyberspace.

At the same time, the passage by Kastman Breuch also demonstrates how attempts to locate a place for online writing centers can lead to an idealization of their physical counterparts. This becomes especially apparent when put in conversation with Jackie Grutsch McKinney's, “Leaving Home Sweet Home: Towards Critical Readings of Writing Center Spaces” (2005) and Melissa Nicolas' “The Politics of Writing Center as Location” (2004), both of which are discussed in our [section on physical space](#). While Kastman Breuch (2005, p. 25) argues that technology “invites us to reconsider our previous conceptual models,” one potential problem in idealizing physical places is that it can limit our ability to creatively reinterpret design elements. Similarly, idealizing physical centers can reinscribe the tendency to shape digital space around a finite number of conceptual models regardless of their efficacy.

Despite the unique design elements that Kastman Breuch describes, much of what she highlights about the [Online Writery](#) and Colorado State's Writing Studio, still appear to be attempts to replicate a physical place, rather than create a digital one. While Kastman Breuch notes how both have changed the conceptual model, to a café and writing studio respectively, more careful analysis is required to determine if well-conceived images, adopting the language of commerce (e.g., “Please wait one moment, we'll be right with you ...”), or the inclusion of background noise truly constitutes a place (pp. 33-34). For example, if we look at Edward Soja's work in *Thirdspace: Journey's to Los Angeles and other Real and Imagined Places* (1996), it is possible to understand how these examples shape material practices (the graphics require you to wait while they load, the interface dictates how you will navigate with the system). It is also possible to see the benefit in how these websites are designed to more accurately represent the unique opportunities and limitations of the medium and to conform to the objectives of their respective institutions. Less immediately clear, is how digital spaces that invoke physical counterparts allow us to truly inhabit them as unique, lived spaces.

One growing trend for online writing centers that presents unique possibilities for immersion into online environments is Second Life. While having the ability to mirror physical places in a fairly accurate fashion, Second Life also has a great deal of functionality that would only be possible in a virtual environment. Russell Carpenter and Meghan Griffin's 2010 article, discussed earlier, provides a wonderful overview of the opportunities and problems with this platform. Beyond the issue of cost, which can be recognized as a potentially prohibitive element for many digital projects, perhaps the largest consideration for tutoring in Second Life has to be the identity politics surrounding tutor avatars. Consider the following passage:

What Second Life for Dummies didn't tell me is how uncool my chosen name—Meg Unplugged—would be in an identity economy where literally any self-construction is possible. In Second Life, one can take the form of a white fox or a dragon, or sport fairy wings and a tail. If my name didn't reveal my newbie status, it would have become apparent as I fumbled through "Orientation Island," bumping into walls and furiously trying to click the unclickable. A friendly stranger in leather chaps offered to show me around. She led me to several shops in Second Life where I could change my appearance, and I acquired an entirely new body free of charge, added outfits to my inventory, and then complemented them with different hair and varying eye colors. (p. 10)

In this passage more than any other in the article, Griffin exposes readers to the promise and peril of Second Life tutoring. We know from IWCA-NCPTW that, because the environment is so immersive, [Michigan State University's Second Life Writing Center](#) has the first session function simply as a tutorial for the world, helping writers navigate their avatars and the session-specific controls. It is easy to imagine that without such a tutorial, many writers would find themselves, like Griffin, incredibly frustrated as they kept "bumping into walls and furiously trying to click the unclickable" (p. 10).

Even after students have moved beyond trouble-shooting, there is still the issue that student and tutor avatars can have "literally any self-construction" (p. 10). Griffin, understandably, demonstrates this feature of Second Life by listing the fantastic. While potentially disruptive to have a session where a fox is tutoring a dragon, the more insidious problem with Second Life for writing centers is that avatars, while helping some users feel more connected to the digital environment, also allow for users to engage in identity tourism.

From blogging to Facebook, writing center administrators need to remain aware of how "technology interfaces carry the power to prescribe representative norms and patterns" (Kolko, 2000, p. 218). Without careful consideration of the tools that we use, and how we use them, it is all too easy to use technology in a way that demarcates our online spaces, and in turn our centers, as operating with an "ideal" user in mind (Kolko, 2000, p. 218). If we choose to use spaces like Second Life, considering how contrary the idea of an "ideal" user is to the mission of writing centers, we must take the preventative steps necessary to avoid creating spaces that produce zones of exclusion or that reinforce problematic "'postbody' ideologies" (Nakamura, 2002, 4).

Among the more conscientious treatments of digital space in contemporary writing center scholarship is Melanie Yergeau, Katie Wozniak, and Peter Vandenberg's "Expanding the Space of f2f: Writing Centers and Audio-Video-Textual Conferencing"(2008). The mixture of audio, video, and text allow the tutor and writer to operate in a shared space, but they are also separated by the physical places that they occupy. This distance, and the ability to so readily perceive it through the audio-video components, can lead to disrupted, informal sessions.

Nonetheless, in many ways this approaches online tutoring through the kind of hybrid system discussed earlier. What still remains unclear is how writing centers can create a sense of place online.

One possible solution is to disregard the notion of place and to approach cyberspace as a non-place. As Marc Augé notes, in *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (1995), “The place/non-place pairing is an instrument for measuring the degree of sociality and symbolization of a given space,” not an indication that either exists in a static or absolute form (p. viii). Some of the locations that he provides as examples of non-places, often transit locations such as highways, translate easily to our perceptions of digital space given common metaphors of the Internet as an information superhighway.

The difficulty in locating place in digital environments might simply be an indication that it remains too unstable and decentered to situate within the existing notions of place. For writers, the work being done in writing centers is in transit, moving through the writing center environment to another location. Even the OWLs that Kastman Breuch argues are successful are so because the conceptual models provide users with simulacra of physical locations they experience in their everyday lives. If “non-place” is a conceptual tool that helps us think about spaces, moving toward a conception of OWLs as non-places may help us remain more critically engaged in the construction of both our online and physical centers.

As Reynolds notes, “Once constraints become familiar—whether they are the desktop of a computer interface or the furniture arrangement of a classroom—they become encoded and thus rarely noticed or questioned” (2004, p. 14). Perhaps, by recognizing OWLs as non-places, we can increase our understanding of how we are inevitably caught in “spaces of circulation, consumption, and communication” (Reynolds, 2004, p. viii). In turn this may lead to a greater consideration of how the spaces operate and are used at various times and by various people, when the space becomes a place and when it functions more as a non-place, and—when we deemphasize the need for stability in online spaces, the need to transform them into inhabited places—we may be more likely to critically consider the tangible space, materials, and labor that support their existence. Additionally, to the extent that digital spaces are more readily seen as non-places, we also encourage practitioners to consider the ways in which this concept may be useful for physical spaces as well.

## Conclusion

While each review is distinct— *A Foyeristic View of OWLs* and *A Treatment of Physical Space* end in the same (non) place. When we surveyed the physical spaces, we found that the conversations were fairly consistent. They emphasized the material conditions, noted the affective dimensions of space, pointed to the community's core values, and discussed the writing center scholars' anxieties over institutional status and power. Whereas the scholarship on OWLs was wide-ranging in both opinions and aims, we did find a consistent pattern: the desire to inhabit digital space in a meaningful way. To some extent our spatial treatment reifies the dynamic between digital and physical space as online writing centers often attempt to replicate the physical environment. The desire to locate ourselves in digital space is therefore a symptom of the developing crisis of location in physical centers.

The communal writing center narrative suggests that centers are redolent with meaning for all users, when in fact many see centers as transient, temporal, and intermediary. The fleeting writing center also speaks to center identities at an institutional level: that is, when colleges and universities create the conditions in which a writing center cannot survive.

Writing centers as place, is a modernist notion, one we've outlined throughout our review. If both online and physical writing centers can be read as non-places, then centers can see themselves as simultaneously apart from and a part of the larger circulation, consumption, and communication of the university. The idea of writing center as non-place allows for a postmodern understanding of the writing center, an awareness that may cause some unease, especially for a community that values comfort. However, when we presume that learning can only happen when we feel comfortable, we deny the generative possibilities of cognitive dissonance.

While we've identified a spatial theory that may be novel to our readers, the underlying concept is not new. Many composition and rhetoric scholars have addressed how our institutional spaces displace students. For example, in *Geographies of Writing* (2004), Nedra Reynolds refers to discourse as space and asks us to interrogate the ways we encourage students to inhabit or dwell in a discourse. She argues, "Inhabitation develops only through habit and familiarity, or when the 'visitor' has spent enough time in that space and others like to move through it with confidence and knowledge" (p. 163). While those "who can't find ways to dwell. . . just move on" (p. 164). Similarly, Johnathon Mauk (2003) refers to "*placelessness* of many new college students" (p. 370) in his essay "Location, Location, Location: The 'Real' (E)states of Being, Writing, and Thinking in Composition." Instead of non-place, Mauk uses terms like *where-less* to describe students who are "not invested in the space of traditional academia, nor. . . in a space perceptible to traditional academic view" (p. 373).

We might begin by asking what it means to meet students where they are, as Mauk suggests (p.374). His call is particularly apt for writing center workers as it speaks to our mission to provide individualized instruction. A non-place orientation forces a parapatetic thought process that confronts where we have been and where we are going, in part because we are less certain of where we are (Augé, 1995, p. 93).

## Notes

i. While 1995 was a boom year for OWL scholarship, it was followed by another five to ten years of solid production in the field. For readers who wish to continue looking into OWL scholarship, we recommend James Inman and Donna Sewell's *Taking Flight with OWLs: Examining Electronic Writing Center Work*. We recommend this work not only because of the quality of the scholarship contained within it, but also because it does not receive serious treatment within this review.

ii. A list of these works would include: Harris, 1995; Harris & Pemberton, 1995; Coogan, 1995; Healy, 1995; Jordan-Henley & Maid, 1995(a); Jordan-Henley & Maid, 1995(b); Chappell, 1995; Johaneck & Rickly, 1995; George, 1995; Strenski, 1995; R. Selfe, 1995; Palmquist, Rodrigues, Kiefer, & Zimmerman, 1995.

Also the Winter 1995-1996 edition of *The ACE Newsletter* (9.4) had a special issue according to Blythe's 1997 article in WCJ. That article also details some conference information from that time period that would further support this claim.

iii. While, in 1996, *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* was *Kairos: A Journal for Teachers of Writing in Webbed Environments*, we have chosen to use the current title to avoid unnecessary textual clutter and/or confusion. The journal's name change will be represented in our [references page](#).

iv. We both agree that the basic premise for this article was interesting; however, it does not receive further attention in this review largely because of its length. In this article, Johnson primarily draws on the scholarship of Eric Crump and the Online Writery.

v. The first term for Lasarenko's article was meant to denote OWLs that provided partial online services but did not provide online tutoring, while the second indicated online writing labs that offered some form of online tutoring.

vi. The CyberTutor Project connected undergraduates in Tennessee with graduate tutors in Arkansas and was discussed in both the *Computers and Composition* and the *Writing Lab Newsletter* articles by Jennifer Jordan-Henley and Barry Maid as listed in an earlier endnote representing some of the scholarship published in 1995.

vii. As these are the first texts we discuss that were written specifically for publication in a digital environment, we think it is worth noting the materiality of these texts and its impact on our review. As the medium allows the reader to navigate in ways that are noticeably different from an article published in a print journal, there is a far greater sense of immediacy and life when reading the articles. At the same time, the fact that these articles remain static within their dynamic medium makes them feel even more dated. These articles, therefore, highlight an interesting paradox of time and space in digital scholarship. Since many of the external hyperlinks are no longer active, the article is at once alive and dying, thought about both in past and present tense. While drawing different responses from the reader than active hyperlinks, the decay of much of the cyber-structure that these articles are built upon still forces a more engaged reading and a more immediate consideration of the medium.

viii. Carpenter and Griffin quote the Educational Support Management Group (ESMG) prices as ranging from \$650-\$899 per year.

ix. Griffin gives reason to believe that the tutor's choice of words, "well-constructed," likely indicates some combination of visual aesthetic and functionality.

x. Where early scholarship did complicate digital space it was generally through considerations of ethos and the potential that tutors would focus on editing more than global revisions.

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