

Privacy in the Online Writing Center

JAMES HAMBY

Face-to-face writing centers have always dealt with issues of security. This is because students' personal information, papers (both graded and ungraded), and private conversations are all part of the daily business of writing centers. The need for discretion, diligence, and a knowledge of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) has long been a part of many centers' tutor training regimen. These issues are changed or amplified in online tutoring sessions, and the rapid switch to online-only tutoring that many centers experienced in Spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic presented numerous problems for administrators and tutors. Yet privacy concerns were not limited to students, as tutors and administrators suddenly found themselves more vulnerable as well; thus, administrators had to quickly adjust procedures to decide upon new best practices for online tutoring. At the Margaret H. Ordoubadian University Writing Center at Middle Tennessee State University, we were averaging around 2,500 sessions per semester before the pandemic, of which only around 400 were synchronous online live chat sessions in our scheduling software, WCONLINE. When we switched to all-online tutoring in March 2020, we added asynchronous document drop sessions to our services to better accommodate students during the pandemic. We made it through that spring and summer without seeing too much of a decline in our volume of appointments, and the sheer number of students we served created situations where privacy potentially could have been compromised. Some of these situations were foreseen, while others were unexpected. Many of the new privacy issues we encountered occurred during document drop appointments, but other problems also arose in communication between students and the writing center and in communication between staff members online. With each circumstance, we learned more about developing best practices for our online center moving forward.

Privacy in Writing Centers

Writing centers provide tutoring in written composition and rhetoric for college students in all disciplines at all levels, from First-Year Composition to doctoral dissertations. As such, writing centers are spaces in which the potential for a breach of privacy is very great. Student information is gathered and stored every time a writer makes an appointment (Parsons et al., 2021). Student papers, graded and ungraded, are out in the open, creating the potential that they may be seen by others without consent. Because students sometimes write about very personal issues, they and their tutors may discuss emotions, trauma, and other potentially sensitive topics in crowded environments and students may be uncomfortable with some of these conversations being overheard (Driscoll & Wells, 2020; Im et al., 2020; Perry, 2016). Sometimes professors contact writing centers wanting to know if their students have attended, what advice the tutor gave, and if the tutor detected any plagiarism (Conway, 1998). These situations occur in writing centers constantly, and many more unexpected ones may arise. This is why every year we have a representative from the university counsel office give us a training session during our orientation on what FERPA is and what we should do to be aware of student privacy. Bridgewater et al. (2019) note that FERPA training is an essential part of becoming a writing tutor. Protecting student privacy not only fulfills the law, but it indicates to the staff the importance our writing center places upon students as individuals who are placing a great deal of trust in writing center associates.

Asynchronous Tutoring

The sudden shift to all-online tutoring in March 2020 created several new privacy concerns to which we had to quickly

adapt. Most of these revolved around our asynchronous document-drop tutoring sessions, which were completely new to us. The most pressing problem was what to do about student papers downloaded to tutors' personal computers. In order to conduct an asynchronous session, students upload their papers to our online platform, WCONLINE, a popular website to which many writing centers subscribe. WCONLINE allows students to schedule their own appointments after signing up for an account, and it also allows writing center administrators to keep accurate records about how students utilize their writing centers. WCONLINE supports both synchronous live-chat and asynchronous document-drop tutoring. The synchronous live chats function much like a Zoom meeting, while in document drop sessions, students upload their papers and tutors then download them, make comments, and upload the new files back onto WCONLINE for the students to access. The document drop process left each tutor with a large cache of student work. As Parsons et al. (2021) note, the storing of writers' personal information may have a "chilling effect" on "intellectual pursuits" that would discourage students from coming back to the writing center (15). Since tutors were working on document drops from home, it was deemed unavoidable that they would be downloading papers to their personal devices. We encouraged them to delete student papers frequently, and we made a rule that required them to delete papers no less than once a week. Of course, this was an unenforceable rule, as there was no way we could know what they were doing on their personal computers. However, we did talk about deleting student papers frequently in our staff meetings and in our interactions over Discord (our use of Discord to communicate during shifts will be discussed below) and stressing the importance of student privacy helped set the expectation that we would keep student information confidential as much as possible.

Another challenge with privacy during document drops was protecting the identities of our tutors, as online tutoring created new situations that may violate their privacy or sense of safety (Nadler 2019; Prebel 2015). When making comments in Microsoft Word, the default setting for the name at the top of the margins comment box is usually the full name of the person to whom the Microsoft Word account is registered. While WCONLINE lists tutors' first names, we caution our tutors to not reveal their last names, their contact information, or any other information they would feel uncomfortable about somebody else having. Fortunately, this problem was easy to fix as the name on the Microsoft Word comment function can be changed.

The biggest impediment to doing this is that the steps are slightly different in each version of Word. For the most part, these steps can be found in a Google search, but some tutors still required help doing this. We found that we needed to check in with each tutor because asking for technical help can be embarrassing, especially when it seems that one's colleagues are having no difficulty with performing the same task. This emphasized to us administrators that we should not take it for granted that all tutors (or students, for that matter) are at the same level of comfort with technology, and that whenever we add a technology or require a new procedure, we need to provide adequate training.

Online Synchronous Tutoring

Our live chat appointments also presented a new set of challenges—but, fortunately, we had implemented audio/visual synchronous tutoring in Spring 2018. When we first instituted audio/visual tutoring, we were surprised by the reluctance of some of the staff. Such resistance to change, however, is not uncommon for writing centers (Neaderhiser & Wolfe, 2009). Though tutors were perfectly fine with meeting students in person for face-to-face sessions, they balked at being on screen for live chat sessions, because the students would be able to see them. However, most of these anxieties faded over time as they became more comfortable with live chat tutoring. Tutors new to the center the next semester accepted live chat tutoring as a part of the job, so it seemed to us that the initial resistance to live chat tutoring was largely due to its novelty and not, as some tutors suggested, to any uncomfortable social circumstances between tutor and student.

With the switch to all-online tutoring in Spring 2020, we feared a similar situation would happen. However, at that time,

so much of education, business, and everything else was moving to Zoom and similar platforms, that shifting tutoring to all-online seems to have been accepted by our staff as a necessity. While they may have been more comfortable with face-to-face tutoring, they were all willing to adapt their practices for live chat sessions at home. Moreover, our administration and tutors embraced the opportunity the pandemic presented in using new methods to make our center more technologically flexible, which has been a major movement in writing centers now for decades (Andersen & Molloy, 2022), which also served to bolster our center's abilities for access and inclusion (Bell et al., 2022).

What was new in this situation, however, was that now students and tutors were regularly seeing into one another's homes. Tutors, of course, had been able to see into students' homes before this, but not as frequently. In previous semesters, students often participated in live chat appointments from the library, from cafes, or from secure spaces in their homes. They had the freedom to choose where they participated in their online sessions and whether they wanted to reveal anything about their home lives. During the early days of the pandemic with mandatory quarantines, however, students lost this autonomy and were often attending tutoring sessions in houses filled with family members or roommates, leaving little room for privacy.

Inevitably, some of the tutoring sessions were overheard by others in the students' homes, but what we most worried about were helicopter parents hovering around their student and wanting to listen in on the session. We have had this situation happen before in the physical center, but we always politely told the parents that all consultations were private and that they would have to wait outside. However, with students attending sessions in their homes, the potential for parents listening was much greater. This was compounded with the problem that we would not necessarily know if the parents were listening in, as they could easily just stay out of the camera's scope. Fortunately, to our knowledge, this situation never arose, but we did talk to our staff about strategies for addressing this circumstance and why it was important for consultations to remain confidential.

While we did not have parents listening in to sessions, we worried about violating students' privacy in other ways. Having a stranger, especially a university employee, seeing into their home can be very disconcerting for college students. H. Denny and Towle (2017) observe that tutoring sessions often embrace "the crosscurrents of wider social, economic and cultural relations" (para. 4). A student may feel judged if their room is cluttered or if there is something else going on in the background, such as additional family members being overheard in the background.

Many students who were caring for children often became dismayed when the children wanted to interact with them, were crying, or were simply playing loudly. Our center has always been pro-family, and it is not uncommon for students, tutors, and administrators alike to bring their children with them into the center. As with other situations, we talked with our staff about tutoring students with children, and we stressed that empathy and understanding were important during these times. And though our staff responded positively to these sentiments, many students still chose to end their sessions early when they felt their home situation was untenable. Perhaps these students were worried that they would be judged and thought not dedicated to their studies. Manze et al. (2021) report that students who are also parents that participated in their study on the effects of the pandemic on college classrooms often felt that "they were hesitant to ask for accommodations, not wanting to be perceived as opportunistic or manipulative" (635). In the same way that students' family members created potential privacy issues, so too did tutors' household members. We asked our tutors to be mindful of who was around while they were conducting sessions so that nobody would overhear their discussions with tutees as the subject matter of student papers sometimes requires more privacy.

As Prebel (2015) observes, "Writing Center work frequently involves a willingness to talk about the self and deeply personal experiences, including trauma" (pp. 2-3). Students often take advantage of writing assignments to process emotions they are experiencing; for many, this may even be the first time they confront these feelings. The prospect of having to talk about emotions or traumatic experiences within earshot of either the student's own family or roommates or of the tutor's household members could have a negative effect on the opportunity for frank and honest conversation. Even if a tutoring session does not involve something as serious as discussions of trauma, other factors may make a student feel trepidatious about being overheard by a tutor's housemates. As H.C. Denny (2010) notes, "People's access to

education and literacy is charged with politics and carries the weight of wider historical relations, all of which impact on their sense of agency and facility with writing for particular discourse communities, most often the academic” (88). It is often intimidating enough for students to overcome whatever barriers they may feel in coming to the writing center and sharing their writing with tutors in the first place, but to further risk being overheard by others may exacerbate those fears.

Tutors, too, may have reasons they do not want students to be aware of their family members. As Tondy et al. (2022) note, tutors in online settings at home lose a great deal of control as they have to “function professionally within home environments wrought with noise, family, pets, and other distractions” (para. 20). Of course, some of our tutors were juggling childcare responsibilities with their shifts, and at times kids would make an appearance during sessions. We again took an approach of empathy, but no one is ever comfortable working and parenting simultaneously. Less scrupulous employers (even in writing centers), may hold parenting responsibilities against workers, thus creating a breach of employee privacy. Even less drastic breaches can be an invasion of an employee’s privacy as their home becomes their workplace. An untidy room, silly posters on the wall, or an outdated computer not functioning properly could cause a tutor to worry that they are at risk of being judged as unprofessional, but it is not fair to judge a tutor’s professionalism by their home environs, especially when they are under quarantine during a global pandemic. Claman et al. (2021) argue that tutors “taking appointments from the comfort of their own home ignores the way that bringing the many spheres of life into their lodgings disrupts the constancy that they wish for when occupying their home” (para. 7). Even if there is nothing wrong with a tutor’s house, it can still be disconcerting for them to allow strangers to see into their homes.

Communication

One more potential breach of employee privacy affected the administrators directly. Although the entire university had switched to online operations and the writing center’s phone message explicitly stated that we were not answering the phone and to please simply email us, several students still left voicemails. While we were able to access these voicemails from home, we were unable to call back except from our personal phones. Of course, this situation was not ideal, and it did result in students mistakenly thinking our numbers were from office phones and calling us back at awkward times. However, this was at least a decision that we made for ourselves, and we stressed to our tutors that we did not want them, under any circumstances, to use their own phones to call back students who had left a message.

A tutoring staff that works entirely from their homes can also lead to an overly relaxed atmosphere where tutors forget to be confidential about discussing sessions. Before the pandemic, when a vast majority of our sessions were in the physical center, we always discussed with our staff the importance of keeping all conversations professional in tone and content, including not discussing tutoring sessions. When we moved to all-online tutoring, one of our tutors recommended adopting Discord, a social media platform originally designed for video games, as a means of communication during tutoring hours. Discord worked wonderfully, both for conducting the business of the center as well as for providing a social outlet for our quarantined staff, many of whom keenly wanted social interaction (Carter et al., 2020). However, the relaxed nature of communicating over Discord perhaps made it too easy for tutors to be forgetful about professional standards. We realized this when a tutor mentioned a student by name and said that they were having a problem with a specific aspect of their writing. While we encouraged tutors to ask questions of one another over Discord during sessions, such as “Does anyone have a good online source for integrating quotes?”, we felt referencing a student by name was a privacy violation. This led to us training the staff on appropriate ways to use Discord that respected students’ anonymity. We told them that if they needed to pose a question to the group chat, they should make it general enough to prevent anyone from identifying that question with a particular tutoring session. If the question did need to be specific to a particular student, then they should directly message an administrator.

We also experienced an uptick in professors wanting proof of attendance for students who had attended the writing center. Fortunately, we already had a good system in place for this event. For many years now we have recognized that discussing students' writing center appointments with their professors, or even acknowledging that they attended, can be a privacy violation (Conway, 1998). Whenever a professor contacts us about a student, we explain this policy to them, and we encourage them to not require proof of attendance as a part of their course, both for privacy reasons and to prevent our center from being overrun. However, we do let students and professors know that, at the student's discretion, they may share their client report form (CRF) with the professor as proof of attendance. Additionally, the student may share the whole CRF with their professor or just the email that shows they have received one after an appointment. This practice gives the student agency in determining how much information they wish to share, if at all.

Student Trust

In addition to the difficulties of securing privacy in online writing centers, it is also difficult to create a sense of rapport with students in virtual settings. Hewett (2015) notes that the ability to establish “a trusting relationship with students in online settings involves a wide variety of activities that both build relationships and solve problems” (48). Writing center pedagogy relies upon the ability to quickly build rapport with students. Sharing writing with a stranger and asking them to help requires an enormous amount of trust on the side of the student. Writing is a very personal endeavor, and students need to feel comfortable in writing center environments, whether they be face-to-face or online, and it is much more difficult to build rapport in an online environment. Youde (2020) notes that emotionally intelligent tutors “can create a more open and effective learning environment with fewer distractions” (25). However, if a student feels their privacy is not secure in an online writing center, then they will be reluctant to use that service again.

Best Practices

Maintaining privacy in online writing centers can be challenging, but we have established best practices over the past two years that have helped us, and we have incorporated these practices into our orientations and weekly staff meetings. Firstly, in privacy concerns with technology, center directors should always be aware of how information is stored. This pertains to both records in online platforms and to any student information that tutors may download on their computers at home. Administrators should have strict guidelines about deleting sensitive information once it is no longer needed. It would be best for at-home tutors to be assigned university-owned laptops so that the university can ensure all stored information is deleted. However, this is a major budgetary issue and may not be feasible.

Communication between tutors and students and between tutors and other tutors also presents privacy challenges. When responding to student papers through Microsoft Word comments, tutors should always change the settings so that their last names are not revealed. Tutors should be aware of the statements that they make over social media, email, scheduling platforms, and whatever other forms of electronic communication their online writing center utilizes. When tutoring from home, employees should also be encouraged to isolate themselves as much as possible in order to protect the student's privacy.

Unfortunately, there is very little tutors can do to ensure that students' family members are not listening in on their sessions, but administrators should discuss this issue with their tutors so that they are aware. Merely asking that students be alone for their sessions may be enough to deter a well-meaning parent who did not think of listening in as a privacy violation. Finally, writing centers should determine what their policies are for professors who require proof of attendance as a part of their course or for extra credit. The circumstances of these requests and how centers respond

may vary from institution to institution, but administrators should come up with some system that is clear, consistent, and that keeps the privacy of students at the forefront.

Conclusion

Much of higher education was already trending towards online options before COVID-19, and the rapid switch to online learning at the onset of the pandemic necessitated and accelerated those trends. For many students, support services like online writing centers have been a vital component of their education over the past two years. Hopefully, students' participation in online centers has disrupted the notion that remote learning is a solitary pursuit. Additionally, what little human interaction students experienced during their online sessions may have given them a sense of community during a very lonely time. However, the shift to online tutoring created many potential privacy breaches and writing center administrators will have to continuously evaluate privacy procedures as technology continues to evolve. Protecting students' privacy is not only the right thing to do, but it is an essential part of creating a welcoming, safe community that facilitates student learning.

References

- Andersen, E. M., & Molloy, S. (2022). Retooling the OWC: Offering clients online platform choices during a pandemic. *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, 46(9-10), 3-10. <https://www.wlnjournal.org/archives/v46/46.9-10.pdf>
- Bell, L. E., Brantley, A., & Van Vleet, M. (2022). Why writers choose asynchronous online tutoring: Issues of access and inclusion. *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, 46(5-6), 3-10. <https://www.wlnjournal.org/archives/v46/46.5-6.pdf>
- Bridgewater, B., Pounds, E., & Morley, A. (2019). Designing a writing tutor-led plagiarism intervention program. *Learning Assistance Review*, 24(2), 11-27. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1234299.pdf>
- Carter, K., Cirillo-McCarthy, E., & Hamby, J. (2020, August 10). Creating harmony through Discord. *Connecting Writing Centers Across Borders: A Blog of WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*. <https://www.wlnjournal.org/blog/2020/08/creating-harmony-through-discord/>
- Claman, A., Seekins, C., & Mardell, S. (2021). Sheltering in place, working in space: Reflections on an online writing center. *The Peer Review*, 5(2). <https://thepeerreview-iwca.org/issues/issue-5-2/sheltering-in-place-working-in-space-reflections-on-an-online-writing-center-at-home/>
- Conway, G. (1998). Reporting writing center sessions to faculty: Pedagogical and ethical considerations. *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, 22(8), 9-12.
- Denny, H. C. (2010). *Facing the center: Toward an identity politics of one-to-one mentoring*. Utah State University Press.
- Denny, H. & Towle, B. (2017). Braving the waters of class: Performance, intersectionality, and the policing of working class identity in everyday writing centers. *The Peer Review*, 1(2). <https://thepeerreview-iwca.org/issues/braver-spaces/braving-the-waters-of-class-performance-intersectionality-and-the-policing-of-working-class-identity-in-everyday-writing-centers/>
- Driscoll, D. L. & Wells, J. (2020). Tutoring the whole person: Supporting emotional development in writers and tutors.

Praxis: A Writing Center Journal, 17(3), 16-28. https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/82567/396_Driscoll_Wells_Proof_8_10.pdf?sequence=2

Hewett, B. L. (2015). *The online writing conference: A guide for teachers and tutors*. Bedford/St. Martin's.

Im, H., Shao, J., & Chen, C. (2020). The emotional sponge: Perceived reasons for emotionally laborious sessions and coping strategies of peer writing tutors. *Writing Center Journal*, 38(1-2), (203-28). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27031268>

Manze, M. G., Rauh, L., Smith-Faust, P., & Watnick, D. (2021). Experiences of college students with children during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Emerging Adulthood*, 9(5), 631- 38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21676968211020225>

Nadler, R. (2019). Sexual harassment, dirty underwear, and coffee bar hipsters: Welcome to the virtual writing center. *The Peer Review*, 3(1). <https://thepeerreview-iwca.org/issues/redefining-welcome/sexual-harassment-dirty-underwear-and-coffee-bar-hipsters-welcome-to-the-virtual-writing-center/>

Niederhiser, S. & Wolfe, J. (2009). Between technological endorsement and resistance: The state of online writing centers. *The Writing Center Journal*, 29(1), 49-77. <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1670>

Parsons, M., Dolinger, E., & Tirabassi, K. E. (2021). Good to know? Confidentiality and privacy in writing centers and libraries. *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, 45(9-10), 10-17. <https://www.wlnjournal.org/archives/v45/45.9-10.pdf>

Perry, A. (2016). Training for triggers: Helping writing center consultants navigate emotional sessions. *Composition Forum*, 34. <https://compositionforum.com/issue/34/training-triggers.php>

Prebel, J. (2015). Confessions in the writing center: Constructionist approaches in the era of mandatory reporting. *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, 40(3-4), 2-7. <https://wlnjournal.org/archives/v40/40.3-4.pdf>

Tondy, E., Gelet, A., & Wetzl, A. (2022). Tutor metamorphosis: Expectations and reality when tutoring remotely. *The Peer Review*, 6(1). <https://thepeerreview-iwca.org/issues/issue-6-1/tutor-metamorphosis-expectations-and-reality-when-tutoring-remotely/>

Youde, Andrew. (2020). *The emotionally intelligent online tutor: Effective tutoring in blended and distance learning environments*. Routledge.