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Is This Your First Visit?: User-Experience and Writing Centers' Online Presence

Cassandra Book

"Simply put, WCOnline allows me to do what I most need and like to do much more easily and cost effectively." (Mika 8, Writing Lab Newsletter)

"We've always found WCOnline to be incredibly user-friendly and very adaptable." (Strang, WCenter Listserv)

"I'm about to tear out my hair. Clients this semester have been very confused about the difference between e-tutoring and online tutoring, though we do mark this in several places and include instructions on the website. So we have clients who have scheduled an online appointment thinking they have an e-tutoring appointment and vice versa. Needless to say, this inherently ends in much frustration on the tutor's part and anger on the client's." (Vorhies, WCenter Listserv)

There is quite a distance between Heather Vorhies' frustration with "clients'" (mis)use of WCOnline and Margaret Mika's and Steven Strang's enthusiasm. Strang and Mika reflect the appointment scheduling and record management system's use from a pragmatic Writing Center Professional's (WCP) perspective—they value efficiency, low cost, and ease of use. The problem, as Vorhies demonstrates, is that a system, no matter how well-designed and

set up from a designer's or administrator's perspective, is only successful when all its end users find it both usable and useful (Mirel). In writing centers, most end users of technologies such as WCOnline are the thousands of writers who visit centers, face-to-face (f2f) or online, for feedback. Instead of assuming the technological tools that WCPs value are useful and usable for writers, writing centers need to reorient decisions and designs for the most important users of physical and online spaces. Integrating the perspectives of writers-as-users will align practices clearly with a writer-centered ethos, a long-standing goal of Writing Center Studies.

User-experience (UX) research provides WCPs a framework for empirically describing and making technology and design decisions based on writers' needs, goals, and actual practices. UX research is situated across disciplines, including Technical Communication and Usability Studies (Redish) in both academia and industry (Cooke and Mings). Embracing UX methodologies can move writing centers beyond imagining what writers need and toward user-informed or centered (Johnson) design for both physical and virtual spaces. UX researchers first gather data about end-users' goals, values, and actual interactions with interfaces or designs. They then analyze and apply the findings into prototypes, designs, and redesigns of systems or processes, with the goal of enhancing the end-users' goals. Further, UX perspectives have the potential to shake up the narrative that writing centers comprise separate "physical" and "online" spaces (see also Healy and Carino). For instance, many students first experience a writing center via a website or scheduling system, so the online experience inevitably shapes the first f2f experience (Metz Bemer).

This article presents a pilot study of how I, situated as a WCP, employed UX to tackle a real problem related to our center's use of WCOnline for scheduling and mediating online tutoring appointments in our "Virtual Writing Center." The pilot study aimed to both understand the processes for online tutoring appointments from writers' perspectives and recommend changes for our center's website and our WCOnline application based on the findings. While UX provides a spectrum of available methods, I gravitate toward participatory UX methodologies that value end-users as co-researchers (Eyman) and acknowledge the ethics of incorporating collaboration with participants (Salvo). While there are limited opportunities to redesign WCOnline, an understanding of how local users' habits contribute to the use and usability of writing center-employed technologies will better situate WCPs to respond to issues.

I am certainly not the first Writing Center researcher to propose that UX methodologies should play a role in writing center administration. In 1998, Stuart Blythe introduced usability to a writing center audience. As he states, "methods already exist for studying interactions of technology and humans—methods that can be adapted to writing center practice" (104). Blythe calls for WCPs to incorporate usability, testing the ease of use of a product or design, as an ethical way to understand writers-as-computer-users in situated settings because it enables "purposeful action" (105). Researchers at Purdue University, focusing on the Purdue OWL, provide a comprehensive model of UX work. Their reports are now valuable open resources on the Purdue OWL (Salvo et al. Purdue). Further, the researchers explain their participatory methodology on two generations of usability testing in several publications (Brizee, Sousa and Driscoll; Driscoll et al; Salvo et al.

"Usability").

Nearly twenty years after Blythe published his call, Amanda Metz Bemer studied the rhetoric and usability of 100 writing center websites and considered how writing centers might better shape their images rhetorically through understanding user experiences. The recent publication of Metz Bemer's article, which strongly recommends usability testing of all writing center websites with target audiences, demonstrates that WCPs may now finally be at a moment where we can begin to shift our technological research energies from key themes such as incorporating multiliteracies (e.g. Grutsch McKinney; Sheridan and Inman) and theorizing online tutoring (e.g. Breuch; Bell) to adjusting everyday designs and practices based on how student writers use digital writing tools and writing center technologies. The range of artifacts in need of UX research is vast and oftentimes context-specific: online scheduling systems, websites, handouts, and physical layouts. However, UX methodologies also have the potential for a broader reach into writing feedback and processes; for example, Megan Boeshart made a strong argument for considering asynchronous feedback and revision through the UX lens in her Southeastern Writing Center Association 2018 conference presentation. In short, UX work is important, and WCPs need a variety of models in order for UX to seem accessible in all contexts. My pilot study aims at the nexus of the website and online scheduling system for online tutoring appointments and intends to show that a highly complex usability study need not be conducted in order to learn significant insights.

Pilot Study

I initially identified usability issues via our service account and phone calls during my normal workday. I noticed that writers who accessed our WCOnline application typically did not have many issues scheduling f2f appointments, but the synchronous and asynchronous online-only appointments in our Virtual Writing Center did have issues. For example, I noted the exact same problem that Vorhies describes in the opening quotation: writers did not realize that the default setting for a virtual appointment is a synchronous video chat session ("Online Consultation"), not the asynchronous emailed feedback option that WCOnline calls, by default, "eTutoring." Many mistakenly scheduled an Online Consultation, leaving their consultant needlessly waiting. Other issues included writers scheduling f2f appointments when they wanted an online-only appointment and writers having trouble uploading their draft for an eTutoring appointment. I developed workarounds for these issues such as manually sending "double confirmation" emails (WCOnline already sends an automated one). While I was aware of these issues, I did not know how to fix them because, to me, the writers were simply not using the system correctly.

When I enrolled in a graduate seminar on Theories of Professional Writing, the course provided me with several lenses, such as studies of workplace writing, usability studies in online writing classrooms, and critical research practices, which helped me identify the issues as system rather than user issues, and the UX methodologies positioned me to address them. I designed a pilot study with the goals 1) to observe writers in an extended interaction with WCOnline and 2) to make modifications that

would reduce confusion resulting in lost consultation time or a missed appointment.   The research questions for the pilot study were:

> 1. How easily does a first-time writer access the University Writing Center's website and schedule appointments for synchronous and asynchronous sessions?
>
> 2. Where are there breakdowns in usability for writers?
>
> 3. How useful are the detailed instructions, located on our center's website, for scheduling online appointments?
>
> 4. What other systems (e.g. email, Blackboard, Google) do writers employ?
>
> 5. Does the terminology employed at our center and in WCOnline (Online Consultation, eTutoring, and Virtual Writing Center) affect the usability of the scheduling system for writers?
>
> 6. What ideal and realistic design and communication changes can researchers and participants recommend to improve writers' user experiences?

The institutional context of the research site is the University of Louisville, an R1 university. The "University Writing Center" (UWC) is situated institutionally within the English department and physically in the main campus library. The UWC provides f2f consultations in the library and one satellite location; online tutoring services are called the "Virtual Writing Center." Currently, using WCOnline as the platform, the UWC provides both

synchronous and asynchronous consultation types in the Virtual Writing Center.

Methodology

Several key conversations in Rhetoric and Composition, Professional Writing, and Computers and Writing provided significant insight to the study's design. For instance, the edited collection Rhetorically Rethinking Usability (Miller-Cochran and Rodrigo) considers usability from the perspective of Rhetoric and Composition research and pedagogy. Rochelle L. Rodrigo and Lisa Cahill's chapter recommends that researchers develop goal-directed heuristics and pluralistic walkthroughs for testing course websites in a controlled environment in order to identify usability issues with the access, navigation, and participation in online courses. Susan Miller-Cochran and Rochelle L. Rodrigo, in "Determining Effective Distance Learning Designs through Usability Testing," make a similar argument. The usability testing in the course-based studies that Miller-Cochran and Rodrigo and Rodrigo and Cahill describe was instrumental in my understanding of applying UX to online writing spaces because they value users as learners and describe conclusions about how they adapted a web course environment based on usability findings.

Yet, Clay Spinuzzi's research on workplace writing habits illuminated a possible solution to one limitation of the usability testing of one artifact (such as a course website). Though methodologies such as Miller-Cochran and Rodrigo's were particularly helpful in describing what Spinuzzi calls users' mesoscopic-level actions, or "the tasks in which people are

consciously engaged" (33), even Miller-Cochran and Rodrigo had difficulty "separat[ing] design issues on the institutional level and design issues at the instructor's level" (100). Spinuzzi's model for "genre tracing" recognizes instead that writing center users are individuals navigating WCOnline within an institution, for various purposes, and as it is networked with other, more familiar, tools and goals. Following Spinuzzi's argument for an integrated scope in workplace research, I paid close attention to all the steps taken for participants to complete tasks and encouraged the participants to go about their assigned tasks as normally as possible.

Such an expansion from usability of one artifact to a user's entire process also aligns with Robert Johnson's insistence that use is individual and local. In other words, the way writers use WCOnline at my institution and the ways (known and unknown) our center is networked to other online institutional spaces cannot be replicated at any other institution: "users understand technology from a unique perspective constructed from knowledge of practice within certain contexts" (Johnson 10). Though I hope other centers see parallels with my research site and their own center and though I try to generalize when possible, use is local and contextual.

Because of the student-centered focus of writing centers, I was also drawn to UX methodologies that insist upon ethical collaboration with participants and critical reflection on positionalities. Michael Salvo understands the process of improving the user-experience as ethical only when it is collaborative with the research participants. Doug Eyman also argues that usability research should be participatory: "From this starting point, where the distance between researcher and participant is minimized, usability studies

can move toward a mode of operation that accounts for the power differential between researcher and participant by granting more authority for action to the user/participant" (219). Both Salvo and Eyman underscore Patricia Sullivan and James Porter's call for critical research practices, in which researchers account for the situatedness of researcher, participants, and research site. While I was not able to incorporate participants into the pilot study's design process from the beginning, I did invite the participants to consider the study's initial findings and provide their perspective on analysis in interviews, while I, too, reflected on my own role at the research site as the Associate Director of the Writing Center. Finally, Sullivan and Porter also advise that researchers recognize the "tensions between ideal methods and realizable possibilities" (164) because of the nature of research methods that aim to take into consideration real contexts. I embraced this understanding of situated research, having to adjust my procedures based on student schedules, technology, and space.

While the researchers I just overviewed had an impact on my understanding of UX's work in related disciplines, several UX practitioners provided more direct guidance in selecting and applying UX methods. My data collection included usability tests and interviews with six participants. Carol Barnum, an advocate for making usability testing accessible for "anyone... who has a hand in development or support of a product of any type" (3) was instrumental in providing concrete guidelines. In terms of participants, Barnum recommends studying subgroups of participants, so, for the pilot study, I identified "on campus undergraduates." After the project was granted IRB exempt status, I recruited students from English department courses for non-majors who fit the criteria of never using the Virtual Writing

Center.   The recommended number of participants for a round of usability testing with a subgroup is five, (Nielsen, cited in Barnum 16). All names used are randomly chosen pseudonyms: Jamie, Jo, Sue, Sam, Kyle, and Kim.

The first part of the data collection was usability tests in a controlled environment. To prepare the formal usability test, I wrote goal-directed scenarios (Appendix) as a heuristic for the participants to attempt. Barnum cautions against simple task-based usability tests that do not fully allow users to embrace a goal: "scenarios need to feel real" (128). For example, instructing a participant to "locate the writing center's website" would be a simple task. Instead, a goal-directed scenario would provide the participant the reason for finding the writing center's website. Additionally, Tharon Howard argues that good scenarios understand users' environments. Howard discovered during usability testing of a citation handbook with students that asking users to play roles that they cannot adopt created a false sense of task success in complex situations. Therefore, the goal-directed scenarios I developed focused on scheduling appointments in the Virtual Writing Center and employed a narrative, beginning with the first scenario:

You have a new part-time job this semester, so you are on campus for a limited amount of time each week. You also have a paper due soon in an important class. You would like some guidance from the Writing Center on this paper. You heard that the Writing Center offers a service for which you do not have to go to the physical Writing Center. Schedule yourself an appointment that will work for your schedule during the week of April 3.

With the first scenario, I wanted to observe the process undertaken for what may seem to administrators a simple task ("schedule an appointment"). I also purposefully designed this scenario so that the participants would not be told which type of online appointment (synchronous or asynchronous) to schedule. I wanted to see if they noticed that there were two types and also ask about their assumptions for what an appointment would be like for "a service for which you do not have to go to the physical Writing Center."

The narrative-based scenarios helped the participants understand why they were completing tasks and allowed me to follow the levels of local processes they undertook as they worked toward the goal. I encouraged writers to interact as much as possible as they "really" would so that I could observe more accurately their localized use (Johnson). For instance, when the writers started the usability test, they were on a desktop with no web browser open. I used screen capture software (Camtasia and OBS Studio are two options) to record the screen, audio, and video (of their faces) and asked them to "think aloud" whatever thoughts came to their mind as they navigated the interfaces. I sat near them and took notes; we interacted occasionally in a conversational manner. I later watched the videos and filled in my notes—one side of the page was a descriptive transcription, and the other side of the page included my reactions and analysis.

Although my original research plan, favoring participant collaboration, called for a focus group with all the participants, the participants' schedules did not align for a focus group. Instead, I conducted individual semi-structured interviews after the usability tests. I selected semi-structured interviews because they allow

UX researchers to "gather data on topics where the interviewer is relatively certain that the relevant issues have been identified, but still provide users with the opportunity to raise new issues that are important to them through open-ended questions" (Wilson). All interviews, except the first two, occurred immediately after the usability test. I was able to use the first two interviews to develop the semi-structured interview guide based on the initial findings. Like I intended with the focus groups, I was able to share initial findings and invite participants to suggest modifications or solutions to their issues and confusions.

The usability tests and interviews occurred in my office in the writing center. Ideally, I would have avoided the writing center space, but finding another quiet, private space on our campus is difficult. I did my best to make the participants feel comfortable and welcome. They sat at my desk while I sat to their left. I assured them how much I valued their perspective even though they did not consider themselves "experts." Many were worried or embarrassed about being "wrong," but again, I assured them that understanding their usability "errors" would help improve our system.

Major Findings

I will review the results from my study for each of the research questions individually except question four. Question four inquired about the use of other systems such a Blackboard or Google as the participants interact with UWC's website and WCOnline. I will discuss the findings of that question in relation to the other research questions.

How easily does a first-time writer access the University Writing Center's website and schedule appointments for synchronous and asynchronous sessions?

The two-part nature of this question yielded two opposite findings. First, even though the scenario did not tell participants to find the UWC's website, the embedded task was to locate the website. Participants easily did so, needing only a few steps between identifying the goal and achieving it, though they accessed it in different ways. Four participants used a search engine and found our website on the first page of results; one participant found a direct link under "Academic Resources" from the institution's homepage; one typed in the URL directly. The majority also found the link to our WCOnline schedule from our website fairly easily, which they achieved through clicking on "appointments" and then "make an appointment."

However, all but one participant failed to successfully complete the second part of the task. The five participants scheduled f2f appointments even though the task was to schedule an appointment "for which you do not have to go to the physical Writing Center." They could schedule either an "Online Consultation" or "eTutoring" to successfully complete the task, but instead they chose f2f appointments, which is the only option available on the default schedule screen (fig. 1). Although there may be other options for using WCOnline with multiple f2f and online locations, we have our WCOnline schedules organized by "center:" f2f library location, f2f satellite location, and Virtual Writing Center. The default schedule is the f2f library schedule; all others are accessed via a drop-down menu (fig. 1). Five participants overlooked the drop-down menu. In

their interviews, most agreed that they felt fairly confident that they had successfully completed the task, until they realized it was a f2f appointment or I pointed out their "mistake." Their feelings ranged from frustration at their mistake during a "test" to embarrassment that they would have missed an appointment. Some realized their "mistake" on their own; in other instances I pointed it out to them during the test. I intervened because I designed the tasks to build on one another, and it would have been impossible to continue to task #2 without completing task #1.
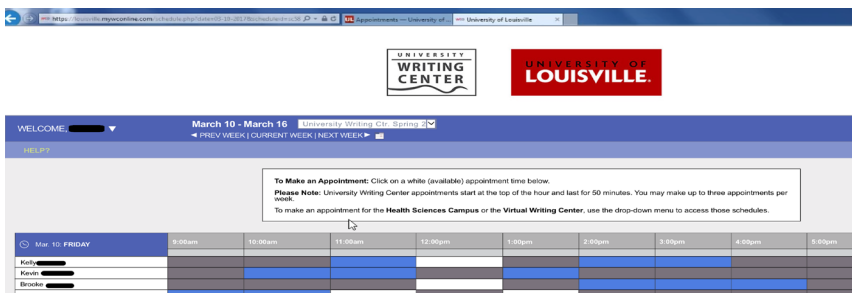

Figure 1: The first screen users see after registering and logging in is the "University Writing Center" schedule, which shows available f2f appointments in the main location. Other schedules are accessible via the dropdown menu near the upper middle of the interface.

Participants seemed so focused on part of their goal— to schedule an appointment—that they forgot to consider the detail that they needed to ensure that they were scheduling an online appointment. They assumed they were succeeding in their task if they did not receive an error message. Jamie described the approach as "let's try and do it" (without reading instructions), and Kim said she was "a little click happy." Once logged into WCOnline, they saw "writing center" and "appointments" and did not question that they could be in the wrong place. There are only small clues to help writers recognize the appropriate schedule or even that there may be other scheduling options. Moreover, on the

UWC website, next to the instructions and explanation for virtual appointments, there is a "Make an appointment" link, but it defaults to the same WCOnline login screen as f2f appointments. New users of the Virtual Writing Center have no reason to consider how the UWC would integrate scheduling f2f and online appointments into one system.

Where are there breakdowns in usability for writers?

The main breakdown in usability was the participants overlooking the drop-down menus (on the login screen and all the schedule screens) to select the schedule for virtual appointments. Administrators in the UWC previously tried to mitigate this confusion and clarify how to use the WCOnline schedules. We included instructions and information in a textbox that appears between the menu options bar and the appointment scheduler, called an "announcement" (fig. 2). Announcement boxes with instructions and information, like figure 2, appear at the top of the Virtual Writing Center schedule and the "Appointment form" (the form completed with information about the appointment before it is reserved). Participants treated all these text boxes the same way, as if the information was extraneous. In her interview, Jamie told me that she read the beginning of the first line of the box, "To make an appointment..." and determined that the whole box would be providing instructions to schedule an online appointment, which seemed to be straightforward to her. She did not read further to the last line regarding use of the drop-down menu to select the schedule for online appointments. Kim admitted that she had not really seen the announcement text or the drop-down options; Jo "skimmed" the box.

To Make an Appointment: Click on a white (available) appointment time below.

If the schedule is full, click on the clock icon next to the date to add yourself to our Waiting List.

Please Note: University Writing Center appointments start at the top of the hour and last for 50 minutes. You may make up to three appointments per week.

To make an appointment for the **Health Sciences Campus** or the **Virtual Writing Center,** use the drop-down menu to access those schedules.
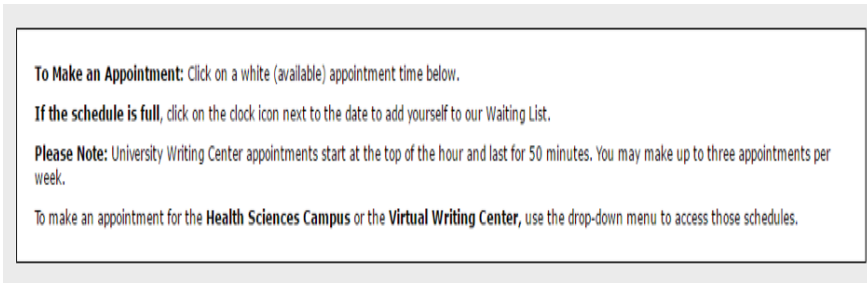
Figure 2: The announcement box on the University Writing Center's schedule with instructions about scheduling an appointment. The last line reads, "To make an appointment for the Health Science Campus or the Virtual Writing Center, use the drop down menu to access those schedules."

Once users locate the Virtual Writing Center schedule interface, the announcement boxes located on the schedule and in the appointment form define synchronous (Online Consultation) and asynchronous (eTutoring) appointment types. Half of the participants scheduled the default synchronous option, even for the task that described asynchronous feedback: "Since you are so busy, you would really prefer that the Writing Center give you comments on your draft and send them to you." Some were able to figure out how to modify their appointment, or they completed a "work around" where they canceled and rescheduled the appointment correctly. Others did not realize their "mistake" until further on in the usability test.

Attaching a file to an eTutoring appointment is necessary to receive asynchronous feedback; however, all except one participant missed the prompt to attach a draft. The prompt only appears after "saving" their appointment. The "attach a file" link is the same font and size as the other text in the box (fig. 3). The "Close window" button is big; users simply clicked "close window" without fully reading the instructions to attach their draft (fig. 3).
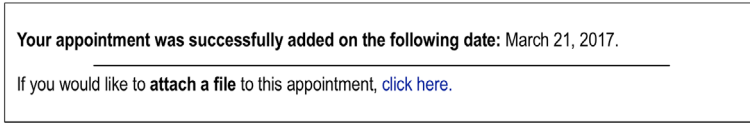
Success!

Your appointment was successfully added on the following date: March 21, 2017.

If you would like to **attach a file** to this appointment, click here.

Figure 3: Screen capture of a writer clicking "close" before reading the "attach a file" prompt.

WCOnline provides the functionality to attach a draft at a later date. The idea is that writers can schedule an eTutoring appointment even if they are still working on a draft. Two participants successfully attached their draft after exploring the interface a bit. Three others needed help or encouragement to figure out how to attach their draft. One gave up. For instance, I would say, "OK now you have your appointment, but your tutor needs a draft to respond to." The first place they logically looked to attach their draft was in their appointment form itself, which they can access by clicking on the (now) bright green box (their appointment) on the schedule. Unfortunately, there is no option to attach a draft in the appointment form; the attach a file (later) link is a yellow file folder on the main schedule screen in the top left.

How useful are the detailed instructions, located on the University Writing Center's website, for scheduling online appointments?

The instructions, including text and video, on the UWC's website were not helpful because they were not used during the WCOnline aspects of the usability tests. No one watched the tutorial video, which is a voice over demonstration of scheduling virtual

appointments. In their interviews, participants expressed little interest in watching a tutorial video for something that, to them, should be simple. Sam recognized that he watches tutorial videos on his own to learn how to do something complex, but not for simple tasks: "I'm not sure if someone's always going to want to take the time out of their day [to watch a tutorial for] something like a writing center appointment. If I was trying to schedule that, I probably wouldn't look into it that much." The fact that we offered instructional information did not seem to matter to these participants because they did not see it or use it.

However, one of the final tasks directed participants to our website and engaged them specifically in finding out unspecified information about the UWC: "You've never been to the Writing Center before and you want to get an idea of what it is like. What questions do you have? Where would you go to find answers?" In this scenario, participants were able to find helpful information to answer their questions. Most browsed the homepage, appreciating the scrolling photos, which gave them a visual picture of what the center is "like." In addition, Jamie, reviewing the Frequently Asked Questions page, noted: "Most of my questions can be answered by the FAQs."

Most striking for me was the fact that when participants tried to find information about the Virtual Writing Center, they could not locate it. Our website's information, particularly our Frequently Asked Questions, only discussed f2f appointments. The Virtual Writing Center information was at the bottom of the general "appointments" page and in the video tutorial. Many did search,

but they did not know to use the search term "Virtual Writing Center."

Does the terminology employed at our center and in WCOnline (Online Consultation, eTutoring, and Virtual Writing Center) affect the usability of the scheduling system for writers?

The terms "Online Consultation" and "Virtual Writing Center" seemed logical and meaningful to the participants. Two identified the option and interface of the Online Consultation module as the aspect of the experience that they liked best. The term "eTutoring" did seem to create confusion and lead to usability issues. Kyle and Sue noted that "eTutoring" could be mean either asynchronous or synchronous: "eTutoring sounds like essentially it would be the online appointment, but in this case it is an email appointment, so I would say change it to 'schedule live chat appointment' or 'schedule email appointment'" (Sue). Moreover, even after I explained "eTutoring" in the interview, Sam still was not sure what it was.

Recommendations and Next Steps

RQ6: What ideal and realistic design and communication changes can researchers and participants recommend to improve writers' experiences in the Virtual Writing Center?

Barbara Mirel describes the flexibility of software architecture as "user adaptability" and argues that it is an important component of usefulness of product (xxxi). WCPs, as administrator users, can modify some WCOnline settings. Moreover, WCPs can make stra-

tegic use of their websites as an additional space to frame writers' experiences. I provided our Writing Center Director with a complete report of recommendations based on the usability tests and interviews; we have implemented most of them already. I have summarized the key changes below.

Modifications to WCOnline

We changed the name of "eTutoring" (for asynchronous) and "Online Consultation" (for synchronous) appointment options. Although prior to this study I was not aware that WCOnline gives administrators the option to change the name on the appointment form, though it still appears as "eTutoring" and "Online" on the main schedule. Since all my participants agreed that "eTutoring" is vague, I would recommend that all centers change the name to clarify. The participants suggested "email feedback" or "feedback." After discussing the options with the Writing Center Director, we decided to try "Written Feedback" and "Live Video Chat" to clearly distinguish between the two appointment types. An easy way for centers to rename these types of appointments in a way that takes into consideration local context would be to poll repeat online writing center visitors about their preferences.

Next, we redesigned the announcement boxes at the top of schedules. The goal was to make the information more visually appealing, which is what the participants wanted. The boxes do not have to be plain text. There are editing tools in WCOnline's settings that allow for font changes, hyperlinks, and photos. Our redesigns are now more visual, based on the participant's recommendations. We used a bigger font, added color, incorporated icons and

symbols, and reduced the amount of text. For instance, the box on the default schedule now includes a big arrow to direct writers to the drop-down menu for the other schedules. On the Virtual Writing Center schedule, we used icons along with our new names for appointments to indicate the two options (fig. 4). We included hyperlinks that direct users to specific (some new or revised) pages on our website with instructional information (FAQs and the tutorial video). In the interview, Jo recommended that if we wanted users to watch the videos, they should be "actually posted where you make an appointment…Put it on the actual site." In Johnson's concept of user-centered technology, he specifically calls out instructional texts as problematic because they put the burden of use on the user instead of the system; the first step to improving instructional texts is to understand how local users interact with the system and users' goals. Often, instructions are simply ignored as a "time-consuming nuisance" (118), which the participants in my pilot study demonstrated in their attitude toward the announcement boxes. Now the instructions are better positioned to get their attention, if they are needed.
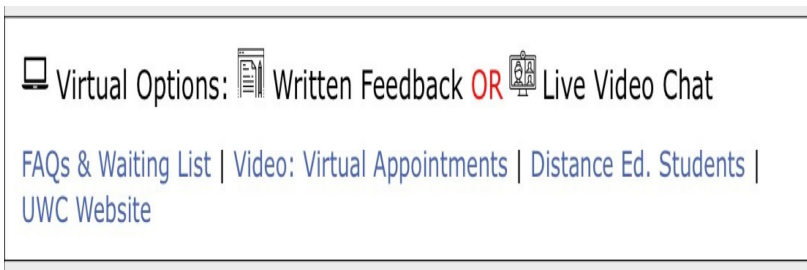

Figure 4: The revised announcement box for the Virtual Writing Center schedule includes descriptive icons and informational hyperlinks. Icons from www.flaticon.com: laptop and video call by Freepik and browser by Smartline.

Similarly, we revised the information box at the top of the ap-
pointment form for online appointments to include instructions
for attaching a draft after an appointment is saved. Participants
returned to their appointment form when they were searching for
instructions to attach a draft but found no clues about how to do
so. At this point, they did pay attention to the text box at the top
of the form.

UWC Website Modifications

Since I noticed a disconnection between the information we had
available and the ability of the users to easily find it, we com-
pletely redesigned the "Appointments" page on our website. The
new design includes icons for our three different centers. The first
heading on the page is "What type of appointment would you
like to make?" We deleted the text-heavy instructions for sched-
uling appointments; users no longer have to scroll to the bottom
of the page to find information about the Virtual Writing Center.
Instead of the text-heavy instructions, we linked to new pages
for the videos and FAQs. Instead of generalized "appointment
FAQs," we made sets exclusively for the two f2f centers and the
Virtual Writing Center. Again, we also link back to these resources
(videos, FAQs, website) from the announcement boxes in WCOn-
line.

We also made small changes, such as setting WCOnline to open
in a new window and using metadata, which included adding
search terms to web pages. Several participants mentioned in the
interviews that they would like WCOnline to open in a new win-
dow when clicking on it. They said they might be more likely to

"go back" to the website. I also noted the participants' reliance on searching Google for the information, hence the adding of search terms. Including search terms can make the difference between a user finding the "Virtual Writing Center" or not when searching for "online writing center."

To be clear, for this description of a pilot study to be a model of UX, the methods would be repeated again to test the modifications, preferably with different subgroups. Although I have not repeated the usability tests and interviews yet, other measures indicate positive outcomes. We recorded twelve fewer "no show" virtual appointments in the fall 2017 semester compared to the fall 2016 semester. In addition, in the f2f writing center, based on my observations, fewer writers scheduled f2f appointments when they actually wanted an online appointment. And finally, in comparing the page views for the original Frequently Asked Questions in October 2016 with the newly revised Frequently Asked Questions pages in October 2017, the number of views for the Frequently Asked Questions pages doubled. Overall, there seems to be less confusion about the different schedules and appointment options, and users seem to be using the available resources.

The UX pilot study described here focused on usability of artifacts (Miller-Cochran and Rodrigo), integration of scope (Spinuzzi), participant collaboration (Salvo), and the value of local use (Johnson). It has given our center a peek into student assumptions, expectations, and navigation tendencies when accessing our website and WCOnline scheduler. But it is certainly not the entire picture. Ultimately it is our center's goal to continue to provide and grow usable and useful online resources and services

for all writers at our institution, not simply to fill up appointment slots. For this reason, we will continue to conduct usability testing on the use of the online schedule and resources, specifically listening to and working with frequently marginalized student populations. At the University of Louisville, those populations include part-time students, multilingual students, first generation students, returning adult learners, graduate students, and students with disabilities. While some of the writers in my study may have identified, for example, as first generation or a student with a disability, the pilot study did not focus on isolating those populations through sampling. Moreover, this article has not highlighted the principle of access, but access to resources should be the paramount goal when developing and designing for online users, as Brizee, Sousa, and Driscoll argue and demonstrate through the necessary redesigns of the Purdue OWL (see also CCC Committee). Finally, I echo Metz Bemer and Blythe's calls for all writing centers to participate in UX for their local centers. The long-term value of understanding writers-as-users will likely outweigh a short-term investment of time and perhaps a little money. While WCPs cannot fundamentally change a system like WCOnline, WCPs can rearrange workflow processes and artifacts shaping an artifact's use, as shown in the modifications that we have implemented.

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Appendix: Goal-Directed Scenarios for Usability Test

Instructions

Read through each numbered direction completely before starting the activity. You should go through these tasks as you would normally, so you may use whatever resources you need (e.g. websites, searches).

As a reminder, when you go through the tasks you are asked to "think aloud." In short, this means you speak your thoughts and reasons for your navigation choices. Any identifying information that is captured will be removed from the recording.
In these scenarios, you are in the process of writing two papers. The drafts of those papers can be found on the desktop of this computer, named "Draft 1" and "Draft 2."

Tasks

1. You have a new part-time job this semester, so you are on (the University's) campus for a limited amount of time each week. You also have a paper due soon in an important class. You would like some guidance from the Writing Center on this paper. You heard that the Writing Center offers a service for which you do

not have to go to the physical Writing Center. Schedule yourself an appointment that will work for your schedule during the week of April 3.

2. Since you are so busy, you would really prefer that the Writing Center give you comments on your draft and send them to you. Schedule another appointment during the week of April 3. You want an appointment where you will receive written comments on your Draft #1.

3. Now that you have an appointment, when do you expect to receive a response from your tutor? (Speak aloud when ready).

4. Another one of your professors just gave you an assignment with several components that you are having trouble sorting out before you get started. Schedule an appointment during the week of April 10 so that you can participate in a live online chat session with a tutor.

5. Imagine that your feedback is ready for "Draft 1" (from task 2). Locate your feedback.

6. Imagine that it is the date and time for the live chat appointment you scheduled in task 4. Go to it.

7. Please go to (the UWC website URL) and tell me:
    What's the first thing you notice?
    What can you do on this site?
    Who is this site intended for?
    Just look around and say everything that comes to mind

8. Stay on (the UWC website URL). You have to write a paper and your professor requires Chicago Style citation, which you have never used before. Find a resource for it.

9. You've never been to the Writing Center before and you want to get an idea of what it is like. What questions do you have? Where would you go to find answers?

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