



July 11, 2010

Effective Writing Center

Dean of Arts & Sciences
B University
B University System
16355 Mercer Road
San Diego, CA 92618

Dear Dean:

Thank you so much for your phone call last Tuesday and for the information that you shared about your school's plans for an online writing center. I strongly support your decision. The evidence in the past several years strongly suggests that teaching writing online offers multiple advantages over face-to-face instruction.

THE ONLINE WRITING CENTER ADVANTAGE

CLICK TO HEAR EACH ABOUT ADVANTAGE



Looking at some of your school's recent press releases, I noticed that you have incorporated the Department of Education's meta-analysis (June 2009) that ranked hybrid, online and face-to-face as instructional modes. Over the past few years the Sloan-C reports have also consistently shown strong increases in online enrollments and flatlining enrollments for traditional, face-to-face instruction. Surely the studies are forthcoming that show the cause-effect relationship between quality of online education and those increasing enrollments.

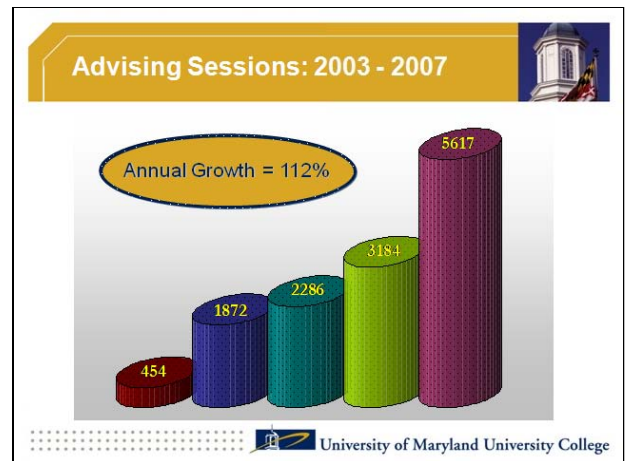
Below is a brief discussion of the three programs that constitute our services in UMUC's Effective Writing Center.

Database Advising

Database advising is how the Effective Writing Center began at UMUC and remains an essential part of EWC's services today:

- Students use a web page form to submit a document (Microsoft Word only) to the EWC database.
- The database administrator assigns the student's document for review to one of the on-duty EWC advisers.
- The EWC adviser, who must check the database every few hours during a work shift, downloads the document, analyzes it, then uploads to the database an advice document for that student. This document is a customized version of a standardized template provided to all advisers.
- The database administrator then uses the database email function to transmit the advice document to the student.

This program has enjoyed increased success since 2007 when VP Greg Lehmann placed a link to the EWC submission page in all WebTycho classrooms in the Course Content area. The 100+% increase in submissions to the database during each of the next two years resulted in an unprecedented expansion of EWC staff from 12 to 27 part-time advisers and from 3 full-time to 5 full-time staff members in 2009. When the budget increase for this expansion was given, the EWC was the only department at UMUC to receive an increase that year.



At the time of the increase, the database was receiving about 6,000 submissions each fall and spring semester.

Database "Upgrade"

Another outcome of the increase in numbers was an "upgrade" to the database designed to provide a more "secure" submission process, increased reliability, the option to "cap" submissions on a given day if necessary, more reporting features, and increased agility for search and retrieval of database assets.

The scare quotes are necessary because following our "upgrade" the number of students using the database has declined. No causal analysis has been done, but this is

not rocket science. The submission process now requires students to follow multiple steps. The student must:

1. leave the EWC web page
2. log into their MyUMUC student account
3. locate and click on a small "MyTools" link at the top of the page's navbar
4. locate and click on "Submit to Writing Center" (last of four small links in a list)
5. fill out the form, attach their document and submit

Before the upgrade, the student could simply click on a big red "Submit" button on the EWC web page, fill out the form and be done.

The only noticeable changes in the upgrade have been the multi-step submission process and the database administrator's ability to "cap" submissions at a given level. Search, retrieval and reporting features have remained essentially the same.

Database Submission

One does not need to be a usability expert to see how to make the submission process more streamlined. Another opportunity for Brandman lies with integrating the writing center database with the university's other systems in order to carry out measurements of use and effectiveness. For example, if databases are talking to each other effectively, it should be easy to answer such questions as: "Do students who regularly use the writing center graduate at a higher rate than those who do not? Get better grades?" and so forth.

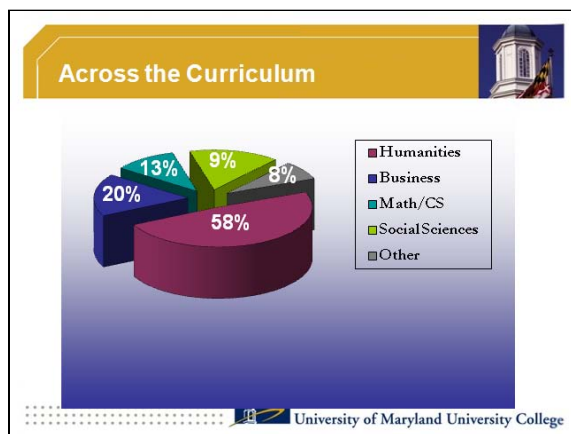
I also lobbied unsuccessfully for the UMUC database upgrade to include the ability to accept a wider range of documents other than Microsoft Word, which currently accounts for around 80% market share. As mobile devices become more powerful and widespread, this percentage will continue to decrease. Also, Adobe PDFs now allow the adviser to embed video and audio directly into the document, a feature that we cannot take advantage of because of the Word limitation.

Guest Lectures: The Mission

When hired in February 2007 to supervise the guest lecture program, I saw an opportunity for expansion. Because every class at UMUC must have a classroom on the WebTycho learning platform, the EWC can visit any class and interact synchronously or asynchronously with its students. In other words, we potentially have direct access to 80,000 students.

Rather than offering generalized writing advice in these classes, I contacted individual teachers and offered to design customized workshops for specific assignments in their courses. For a typical a guest lecture workshop:

1. The professor selects a writing assignment from his/her course syllabus.
2. I prepare html materials to guide students through that specific writing assignment.
3. Once the professor approves the materials, advisers upload the materials and conduct the workshop in the online classroom.
4. We provide detailed and individual feedback (written, audio and video) for the writing that students submit during the workshop.
5. Our threads are scaffolded to take the student through the writing process, from assignment analysis, to outlining, drafting, revising and submitting the assignment.



We focus on a specific assignment from the course because students are more motivated during a workshop that helps them complete a course requirement. Also, instruction is more effective when conducted in the context of a student's own writing. Using this customized approach, we can more effectively teach the basic skills that students need for any writing assignment.

An unintended but welcome consequence has been the development of a core of faculty who have become our partners in important ways, inviting us each session into their classes and becoming some of the school's strongest advocates for the Effective Writing Center and writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives.

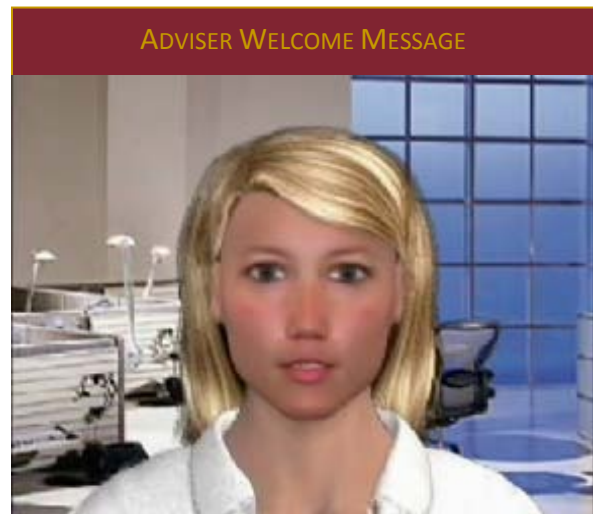
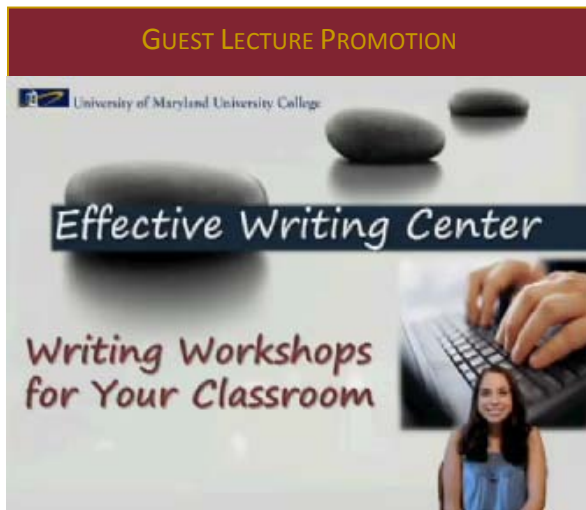
Guest Lectures: The Materials

When hired in February 2007, my goal was to use digital technology to make online writing instruction as effective as face-to-face. As research is starting to show, that goal is too modest. It is increasingly clear that effective use of digital technology can make a face-to-face writing classroom as old fashioned as a chalkboard. Face-to-face teaching is limited by time and space. Digital technology offers limitless possibilities.

In 2007 I began researching various forms of digital technology appropriate for use in online writing instruction and soon discovered that corporate training programs were at least 10 years ahead of higher education in research and use of interactive, multimedia, avatar-driven learning materials. In June, 2009 I put together an overview of my findings with examples of EWC materials into a two-part workshop, "The Avatar Solution," given at the Sloan-C International Symposium on Emerging Technologies in

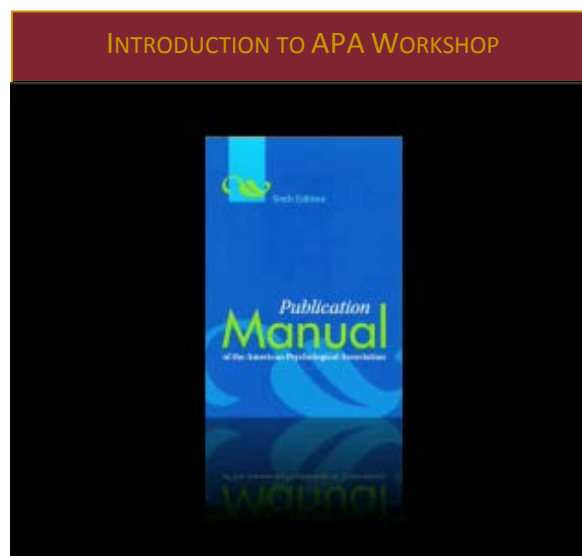
San Francisco. The html materials for both workshops are archived [here](#), and Sloan C's taped version of the first workshop is archived on my YouTube [channel here](#).

Because of the effectiveness of these materials, we try to give everything we do in the guest lecture program an avatar-driven, multimedia component, from the promotions for our writing workshops, to the personalized welcome messages from the guest lecture advisers, to the instructional materials themselves.



Guest Lectures: The Workshops

We have developed a repertoire of workshops. For example, we help students prepare their prior learning portfolios for evaluation, tutor students for the writing portion of the Praxis exam, conduct employment resume and cover letter workshops, review drafts of master's theses, teach students how to make video and audio podcasts, sharpen their PowerPoint design skills, and even design their documents for visual literacy standards. However, our main task remains helping students in a variety of academic courses prepare academic essays and research projects.

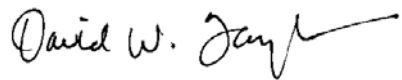


Live Advising via Teleconference

The third component of the EWC's services is live advising via Adobe Connect. To date we have been given the administrative go-ahead to begin live advising, have recruited advisers, and developed a [series of training videos](#) (link to YouTube playlist) for Adobe Connect. However, because of the change in directorship this summer, that project has been put on hold.

In the guest lecture program we have been using the Adobe Connect program since 2007 to supplement our class visits. Overall, some students will want to meet face-to-face and find that the interaction adds to their learning experience. Adobe Connect is the best platform for this purpose because it allows multiple web cams to appear simultaneously onscreen, thereby increasing the psychological sense of presence and copresence that has long been the advantage of face-to-face instruction. With Adobe Connect that advantage is not only obviated but also exceeded since the live interaction can take place anytime, anywhere.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David W. Taylor". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

David Taylor