

Computer Writing and Research Lab

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Getting to Work: Transitioning to a New Staffing Model

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Abstract: This paper describes the rationale for the CWRL's new staffing model, providing historical context for the model, which was implemented in the fall of 2005.

History

The Computer Writing and Research Lab (CWRL) of the University of Texas at Austin draws its staff from graduate student assistant instructors in the Division of Rhetoric and Writing (DRW) and Department of English. Assistant instructors (AIs) support themselves as they work toward doctoral degrees with these 20-hour per week appointments: on average, about 13 hours a week go toward teaching one course each semester, the other seven toward a “staffing” appointment either in the CWRL or the Undergraduate Writing Center (UWC).

In the past, the typical CWRL staffer would teach a course in one of the Lab's computer-assisted classrooms, proctor for six of these seven weekly hours, then attend hour-long “cohort” meetings twice-monthly for continued training, discussion, and support. Thus, in their required hours, Lab staffers got a respite that amounts to half an hour a week.

Cohorts were small groups led by the Lab's assistant directors (ADs). Lab administrators form these cohorts each semester around staffers' available hours: staffers signed up for the most convenient of three meeting days/times; more recently, ADs went directly to staffers' online schedules and grouped them by overlapping free time. Typically, at the first meeting of the semester, the cohort discusses topics of interest to individual members—say, learning more about Web design or imagining class projects using Multi-User Domain software. The group then organized a semester schedule to address these topics. At times, ADs would invite cohort members to learn about their areas of interest on their own and present their findings during group meetings; at other times they would provide this additional training themselves or reserve part of cohort time to give individual staffers one-on-one help with their technology-aided projects. To more closely link staffers' growing technological proficiency with their pedagogical goals, the 2004-2005 ADs asked their cohort members to identify a specific technology-aided project at the beginning of Spring semester, then worked to discuss and develop those projects during the course of the semester. Ultimately, cohort members handed in short write-ups of these projects to populate the Lab's new technology-aided assignment database. Though these write-ups were expected of staffers, and many produced excellent submissions, not all handed them in. In fact, a small number of staffers largely, even entirely, shirked their cohort responsibilities. No structure exists to document or enforce staffer participation in these activities. Thus, while cohorts give Lab administrators a way to keep regularly and directly in touch with staffers' concerns and interests by offering a chance for small support- and idea-sharing communities to form within the Lab, the degree to which these communities actually “gel” and the other functions of the cohort are realized—functions ranging from refresher training, to individualized in-depth training, to discussion of professionalization and issues in teaching, to the raising of concerns—is a matter of discussion among Lab administrators. In short, the different interests of cohort members and catch-all function of these groups can create a fragmented experience for staffers.

Indeed, staffers may well feel some disconnect in their work with the CWRL because almost all our staff is drawn from Ph.D. students in UT's Department of English, many of whom never imagined doing technology-aided work. But because they teach many of the DRC's lower-division writing courses, they are channeled into the DRC's premier undertakings—running one of the largest writing centers in the country and one of the first “labs” for the study of writing pedagogy and technology. Thus, our staff comprises young

Miltonists and medievalists, specialists in gender and ethnic studies, scholars of long poem and the 18th-century novel. Few of our staffers—four of thirty-five in 2004-2005—are students in the Computers and English concentration. Two of those four have served as ADs for the Lab; predictably, students in the Computers and English concentration often are leaders in the Lab. But the rest come to the CWRL more by coincidence than design. Preparing them to teach and proctor in this environment, which often means overcoming some level of discomfort with technology, is a perennial project for the Lab. While generating intellectual investment and excitement in the Lab's work is a constant challenge, we feel that a reconsideration of the structure of the cohort model would bring closer together the interests of staffers with the many technological opportunities that the Lab provides.

Proposal

We have proposed a staffing model that will be more responsive to staff interests, be more beneficial to individuals and the lab as a whole, and allow for greater agency in staffer development. The model dispenses with cohorts altogether. Instead, staffers will attend workshops or their own choosing and participate in a workgroup determined by their own interests. Staffers will be responsible for some end result that both reflects their interests and benefits the lab in some way. Below, we describe the various phases of this plan. This proposal will be implemented in Fall 2005.

Orientation

The proposed change from the cohort model to the workgroups affects numerous levels of the CWRL and will need to be coherently and confidently presented from the very beginning of the academic year. The new model must be explained succinctly at orientation for both new and returning staffers: it should be very clear why and when we're doing what we're doing. A calendar with workshop dates, descriptions and brief explanations of the workshop model, the symposium, and the workgroups will be provided at orientation in order to give staffers a reliable schedule of dates and meetings.

Workshops

The major overhaul of the cohort system will allow us to separate our obligation to provide ongoing training for staffers from our goal of engaging their professional interests. This separation may allow us to better do both: we will work to first build staffers' confidence with Lab technology, then invite them to meet with colleagues who

share similar professional interests to together imagine ways technology might facilitate their teaching and scholarly work. Twice-monthly cohort meetings will be replaced with a mix of “core competency” workshops and introductory workgroup meetings in the fall semester, followed by a schedule of workgroup meetings in the spring. Core competency workshops will be held on topics like “Getting to Know Your Computer-Assisted Classroom,” which might extend and review the introduction to classroom hardware and network basics provided at the Lab’s annual fall orientation, “Teaching the First-Year Forum Text with Technology,” “Building and Role-Playing in Multi-User Domains,” “Teaching with Mind-Mapping Software,” “Making Short Films with i-Movie,” “Creating Photo and Graphic Essays,” “Perks and Pitfalls of Class Blogging,” “Managing Online Course Materials with Drupal,” “Building Professional Web Sites,” “Using Word Commenting,” “Teaching with the Learning Record Online,” etc.

Lab administrators will seek staffers’ input on workshop topics through a summer survey. Staffers will be provided a calendar of workshops and a very brief preview of each at orientation and will be able to sign up for those topics that specifically appeal to them. Attendance will be taken at the workshops and entered into an online database staffers can access to check their standing; they will be required either to attend three, or two and a session of the fall colloquium. Each workshop will be scheduled for 90 minutes, combining presentation and hands-on work, resulting in some end product. Each session will provide attendees something to carry away, such as a useful handout, a new assignment, or the beginnings of a web site.

Early in the spring semester, workshops will again be offered. These workshops will consist of repeated workshops from the fall and the possible addition a few extra ones based on feedback from the fall. We believe that a repetition of the core ones is necessary for those who try only a few things in their classes in the fall, but want to expand their use of technology in the spring semester. Attendance at these workshops will not be required, except for staffers who need to make up for having missed fall workshops or the symposium.

Workgroup meetings and projects

Whether During orientation, every staffer will sign up to participate in a workgroup. By the end of the school year, each workgroup will produce an end product such as a website, substantial White Paper, article, or any other appropriate format for the project on which they have been collaborating. The primary goal for workgroups is to explore the connections between their academic interests and the use of technology. After an initial meeting at the first all-staff meeting

of Fall, workgroups will proceed slowly. Instead, early in the semester staffers should attend core competency workshops. Later in the fall semester, staffers should attend a colloquium panel. With these interruptions in mind, we can expect workgroups to develop a plan for their project and identify what support they need from the ADs in terms of tailored presentations, workshops and resources. The bulk of the work on their project will be done most likely in the spring.

To ensure that people get to know each other and get started on their workgroup projects early, we will have the initial and final workgroup meetings right after the Fall semester staff meetings. Workgroups establish e-mail contact with one another and be assigned an AD for support (such as coordinating training). The AD will help form a schedule of meetings and ensure that all staffers participate in this required part of their staffing assignments and to create a forum for short write-ups of their activities for the CWRL web site to ensure continuity and institutional memory.

Staffers already will have received letters or emails from group facilitators welcoming them to their group, explaining their topic and suggesting possible directions for the group. These suggestions should not be prescriptive: their purpose is to spark others' ideas. At the opening session, the group will discuss their own work, their ideas about what working in the Lab might mean for them, and what kind of projects they might undertake. For example, a group interested in women and gender studies might decide to discuss how technology might facilitate a feminist pedagogy, or build a web site to act as a national clearinghouse of information about women writers' lives and work, or develop a technology-aided project in conjunction with the English department's Women, Gender, Literature interest group. Other possible group topics might include ethnic and third world studies, visual rhetoric, "textualities" (which might consider the technology-aided authorship and reading), "communities" (which might consider online communities, technology's role in linking traditional communities, service learning, the digital divide, and open source), or "literature and technology." By the middle of the fall semester, workgroups will be asked specify a project that they will begin in the spring. At the final staff meeting in the fall semester, staffers will meet their research group and discuss their schedule for the spring. In the spring semester, the regular schedule of workgroup meetings will remain largely uninterrupted and will be devoted to working on their projects. The final spring staff meeting will be used to showcase every workgroup's project and suggest possible future directions for research. Staffers will be solicited for feedback on the workshop sessions at the end of fall semester and the workgroups at the end of spring semester to help lab administrators continue to hone this new

system and its products.

Currently, cohort groups meet for a single semester. Workgroups, however, may be long-standing, meeting from year to year and providing opportunities for newer and more experienced graduate students to work together in their fields on technology-aided projects directly linked to the work that brought them to graduate school in the first place. We hope that they will energize future CWRL colloquia and in-house publications. More than that, we hope that they will help make the Lab an integral part of staffers' entire graduate school experience rather than a mandatory diversion that interrupts their work.

Possible Future Changes

This new system puts considerable responsibility on Lab administrators. Workshops must be well-prepared and valuable, and no staffers can fall through the cracks of the workgroups without the mentorship of an AD cohort-leader. ADs will need to be vigilant about getting to know staffers and being present for office hours and special help sessions. In fact, it might be worthwhile still to divide the staff into three groups, one for each AD, who will contact each staffer in his/her group a couple of times during the semester to check-in so that each staffer has a go-to person for their concerns and questions.

We are hoping, in the end, that the proposed workgroup model will give staffers a more cohesive experience and understanding of the Lab. Yet we also feel that, in the future, the role of the developers could be adjusted to fit within this model. Currently, developers are staffers who nominate themselves to work on the Lab's ongoing projects, such as maintaining the Lab's various web sites, producing a yearly newsletter, soliciting and editing articles for the Lab's online journal, *Currents*, and the like. Developers are not required to attend cohort meetings or proctor open labs; rather, they devote their time to working on these projects in the developer corps. In the future, it may be worth considering whether or not developers and the workgroups can be more fully integrated. Under the new model, developers could have a leadership role to play. Each workgroup would have a representative in the developer corps. Developers of all experience levels and workgroup interests could apply for those positions. If a workgroup is not represented, they would be encouraged to nominate someone from their group. Developers will continue to work on CWRL projects in lieu of proctoring, but they will attend workgroup meetings as well. Such a liaison position will enable developers to learn more about the CWRL, to take their knowledge to the workgroups, and to distribute knowledge by bringing workgroup ideas and concerns to the developer corps and,

thus, to the projects of the CWRL. As a result, we would have a tighter community of people who know what is going on and can see connections between CWRL projects and staffers' academic and professional interests.