

# *Computer Writing and Research Lab*

White Paper Series: #050616-1

## *Restructuring the Computer Writing and Research Laboratory's Colloquium: Some Prospects for Symposium*

Mitchell M. Harris  
mmharris@mail.utexas.edu  
University of Texas at Austin

16 June 2005

*Keywords: colloquium, symposium, roundtable*

*Abstract:* Since its inception, the colloquium hosted by the Computers Writing and Research Laboratory (CWRL) has been held in the Spring Semester of each academic year to highlight various achievements and advancements of the lab. These achievements and advancements, however, have had little reception due to lack of participation. In order to reassess the function and reach of this program, CWRL developers met throughout the course of the 2004 Fall Semester to discuss possible ways to reengage graduate student and faculty interests. This whitepaper articulates some ways in which the colloquium can be reshaped to meet the demands and interests of its intended audience. variety of purposes in the teaching of literature.

---

In this past spring's CWRL Newsletter, Clay Spinuzzi highlighted many of the challenges that face the Computers Writing and Research Laboratory. As was evident from his comments, a common factor linking these challenges to one another is growth, and the CWRL's growth has been organic. On one hand, this offers unique and meaningful opportunities to graduate student instructors. As each can testify, in some capacity or another, the use of technology in composition instruction has a direct beneficial impact upon the work of their undergraduate students. Moreover, this impact is tangible and quantifiable. Whether it be something as simple as introducing Microsoft Word Commenting in order to foster the notion of a collaborative writing process or something as complex as self-reflexively reassessing the medium of writing and its place within the digital age, graduate student instructors challenge their students to think about writing and writing environment(s) in ways they had never been allowed to think before. On the other hand, these instructors seldom have time to document material that is important for understanding the institutional history and scholarly capacities of the CWRL. Moreover, these

graduate students must, at one point or another, leave the program, and the resulting steady turnover rate proves to be another factor that hampers the lab's ability to consistently acknowledge and document its achievements. In this regard, our organic growth is problematic for an educational institution struggling in the midst of a slow economy and ever-tightening governmental funding to justify its expenditures.

The CWRL also faces external, non-mitigated growth problems—chiefly, the endless expansion of computer technologies. Today it would seem that technology in its various forms (computer hardware and software, multimedia teaching station hardware, etc.) outpaces our capacity to comprehensively assess it. Perhaps the next best thing in writing instruction passes by unnoticed. And even if CWRL instructors could catch and assess every piece of technology now on the market, they eventually would face the concomitant problem of institutionalizing the use of these technologies while keeping a careful eye on pedagogical theory and praxis. When graduate student instructors are pressed to do their own coursework, research, writing, teaching, and staffing, little time remains in which they can experiment with a new technology component in order to provide a systematic assessment of its value to the lab, the teaching discipline, and the university.

It may go without saying that these internal and external growth problems were felt in the past, but they have compounded exponentially over the years and, today, stare us down in the face. In order to assure that our ability to stay at the forefront of computer literacy and composition studies remains intact and, indeed, becomes stronger, it seems to me that one of the most pressing goals at hand for the CWRL is to restructure some of its components to ensure an efficient flow of information between all those involved in its day-to-day functions: staff, faculty, and graduate student instructors alike. Much in the way of restructuring has been accomplished in the past year: working with content management systems that will collect and record our work (presenting a necessary means to catalogue institutional history), developing a space on the CWRL website for discussing pedagogical theory and praxis (“Teaching Spotlights”), and more. It is here where I believe that another key feature of our program, the CWRL colloquium, deserves special attention.

When meeting with various developers throughout the past year, it became apparent that our colloquium was not presenting its target audience—namely graduate students and faculty—with an interactive forum capable of expanding practical knowledge and the theoretical horizons of classroom technologies. Here are some key points of issue that were made clear through a careful review of response surveys colloquium participants filled out in the past and through discussions with CWRL developers and Assistant Directors (ADs). Participation was found lacking, and the reasons for this include:

- A lack of publicity and/or an poorly defined intended audience;
- Interference with work and class schedules;
- Colloquium topics often repeat/reexamine orientation issues without pushing their presentations in any new direction;
- Spring is not conducive to the incorporation of new technologies into classroom activities;
- Some panels appear to be less rigorous than others, and thus information gleaned from these panels appears more anecdotal than quantifiable (this problem may stem from unclear presentation guidelines);
- Introduction of new technologies is often coupled with speculative pedagogical theory (i.e., this technology could achieve this or function as this, etc.);
- There seems to be a failure to consistently recognize engaging or pressing topics for classroom concerns.

Having examined these concerns, it becomes apparent that a series of initiatives could be implemented in order to assure the colloquium become a stronger component of the CWRL's internal mechanisms of communication and intellectual advancement. Here are some of the initiatives the developers and ADs propose:

- Compress the colloquium into a one-day event that either feeds into or off of CWRL and DRC orientations (The one-day format will help ensure that interference with personal schedules remains minimal.);
- Structure the colloquium around three to four consecutive roundtable, interactive discussions rather than concurrent sessions;
- Post presenters' papers two weeks prior to the colloquium in order to prepare all participants for the roundtable sessions;
- Change the date to early- to mid-October—instructors' schedules will be solidified and information gathered from the fall orientation will be fresh (The change of date is complemented by the assumption that a fall date will allow for spring and summer developers to prepare papers for colloquia presentations and subsequent publication in the White Paper Series.);
- ADs and summer developers should thematically link the presentations to create clear session topics;
- End the day with an invited keynote speaker, followed or preceded by dinner (as the budget will allow);
- Lastly, change the venue. In order to increase the professional ethos the colloquium tries to instill upon its many partici-

pants, it is important for these participants to see that their ideas can be presented and expressed outside of the computer classrooms in which they teach.

The developers also considered some long-term goals for the colloquium. Our discussions made clear that an alteration of the colloquium's overall structure is warranted. A large majority of those consulted agree that the colloquium should encompass a symposium-based model of information flow: in past colloquia the separation of presenter from attendee resulted in the flow of information being unidirectional—i.e., presenter to attendee. Many respondents commented that this directional flow made for a passive audience. We believe roundtable discussions will better allow for an open, vocal exchange of ideas and, thus, a more engaged audience. In fact, a symposium-based model goes to lengths to dispense with the presenter-attendee dichotomy by allowing future attendees and presenters to view themselves as a single body of participants.

Beyond the turn to a symposium-based model, other long-term goals many of our respondents wish to see implemented include the expansion of our audience base and the integration of information platforms. Expanding the symposium to a university-wide and, in due time, nation-wide event would help ensure that the CWRL remain informed by other departmental and institutional practices and, in turn, other departments and institutions be informed by our practices. Integrating the colloquium/symposium with the White Paper series, *Currents*, and a possible practicum or workshop series would allow for a stream-lined information flow—a necessity warranted by the numerous time constraints placed upon faculty, staff, and graduate student instructors. Moreover, our ideas, achievements, and developments would benefit from the opportunity to be tested and/or reinforced against different platforms of publication: symposium, White Paper, workshop, etc.

As things presently stand, it appears that the fulfillment of some of our long-term goals will be achieved this upcoming fall as the ADs prepare to institute a workshop series—in which instructors can sign up for topics reflective of personal research and teaching interests—in place of the cohort groups that have met in the past. Over the course of the summer, we hope to shape the symposium so it can act as a congruent springboard for this workshop series. With a renewed intellectual intensity, we believe instructors at all levels will come away from the symposium better understanding how it serves as an intricate component of their CWRL experience. Moreover, they can come away with a better sense of the possibilities computer writing instruction holds for their teaching practices and their students' learning environment.