CHAPTER 11.

CONVERSING WITH THE PAST: HOW PREVIOUS RESEARCH CAN GUIDE APPROACHES TO GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN WRITING CENTERS

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When I first drafted this chapter, I was writing at a time when the rapid growth of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) meant there was a lack of peer-reviewed research about GenAI and teaching writing—and especially in the context of writing centers—when we would most benefit from such research. In the time since that first draft, we've seen research projects set in writing centers move through the peer review process to publication (Aikens and Weildon or Essid and Cummins represent two recent examples in *The Peer Review*), along with tutor training resources (see Bell). Just look at Part 2, "Researched Inquiries on AI and Writing Center Labor," in this collection for further examples. Even so, the sudden proliferation of GenAI tools and the rapid pace of change within the tech industry have still left many writing center professionals uncertain about whether GenAI can benefit our students and, if so, how.

From a personal perspective, I'm not convinced that GenAI offers our students anything useful that isn't better achieved through other tools or teaching methods. Since first proposing this chapter, I've moved from tentatively curious about the possibilities of GenAI to almost entirely opposed to using it in education. I simply don't see what it brings to the table that wasn't already there, other than efficiency, and learning (especially learning to write) isn't and shouldn't be efficient. As Ellen Cecil-Lemkin and Lisa Marvel Johnson write in this collection, GenAI's aggregation of data to generate text erases the very feature of writing that makes it such a human endeavor, the messiness. They argue for centering the human and embracing the mess when helping students and writing center consultants navigate GenAI as a writing tool.

DOI: https://doi.org/1010.37514/PER-B.2026.2791.2.11

From a professional perspective, I see Joe Essid and Cady Cummins' reasoning when they note that we may be near a point of practicality when it comes to GenAI adoption. The technology is here, our students are using it, and our institutions are largely either allowing or actively encouraging its use across the curriculum. Writing centers support student writers, and GenAI is quickly being integrated into students' writing processes (whether by student initiative or faculty assignments). Our role is to help our students grow and improve as writers. That means engaging with GenAI to some extent. How do we do that?

I believe that to find our way forward, we should look to the past. We have decades of research on how and why writing centers are effective resources for writers. Matthew D. Bryan also reminds us that we have a "decades-long history of writing center discourse around software-mediated writing and tutoring practices" (16). We can find parallels and inspiration by reviewing how our field has navigated the upheaval of new technology in the past (Bryan) and by revisiting existing research on writing center practices. Asking how GenAI might fit within past research can inform our thinking and decision-making regarding the role of GenAI in our writing centers going forward. As others point out, those decisions must center the human writers we work with (Cecil-Lemkin and Marvel Johnson; Essid and Cummins).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In response to the release of OpenAI's ChatGPT, some institutions created task forces and drafted policies to address growing uncertainty about what GenAI means for higher education. Other institutions let faculty decide for themselves whether GenAI has a place in their classroom. My institution, Furman University, has been operating closer to the latter position. While faculty set in-class policies, multiple departments, including our writing center (the Writing & Media Lab), have been independently developing resources related to our areas of expertise.

Furman is a small, private liberal arts college in Greenville, South Carolina, in the southeastern United States, that serves approximately 2400 undergraduate students and a growing number of graduate students enrolled across just over 25 master's programs. Prior to the 2023-24 academic year, administrators reviewed our academic integrity policies and determined that if faculty want to allow or prohibit GenAI in their courses, the policy as written already had provisions supporting either position. Administrators have continued to refine the policy's wording as we learn more about how GenAI is being used by faculty and students, but any in-class use of GenAI remains at the instructor's discretion. While the university's open-ended guidance promotes academic freedom

for faculty, it also means that our students receive a variety of different messages about GenAI. Those of us who support the academic program face uncertainty about how best to move forward.

In the Writing & Media Lab, we have taken some tentative steps toward exploring GenAI by training consultants on what it is and how it works. But consultants must be cautious in their consultations. Before using GenAI with a student, we need to confirm through the syllabus or the assignment whether GenAI is allowed in any way. If it's allowed but not required, we also need to consider whether GenAI would help the student achieve the learning goals of the assignment.

THEORY, PRACTICE, AND GenAI

In 2021, Jesús José Salazar published a meta-analysis on the impact of writing centers. A meta-analysis allows researchers to "average out the results of many studies into one general result" (56). Salazar used 82 studies conducted between 1954 and 2019 to answer whether visiting a writing center has a measurable impact on student writing outcomes. After conducting seven meta-analyses, Salazar found "a statistically significant and positive relationship between students visiting the [writing center] and greater writing performance compared to not using the [writing center]" (69). Furthermore, "we can be 99.9% confident (nearly 100% confident!) that between 28.7% and 32.7% more students who visited the writing center demonstrated greater writing performance than students who did not" (69).

In retrospect, Salazar's publication was well-timed, considering ChatGPT was released the following year. Given Salazar's results, it seems safe to operate under the assumption that writing centers help students improve as writers. We can also conclude that the theories and practices underlying consultant-student interactions play a role in Salazar's results. If we decide to use GenAI during writing consultations, we need to keep in mind that the writing center practices developed and used over the last 65 years are effective. The question then becomes not just how we can use GenAI, but rather, can we use it in a way that enhances current writing center practices and supports student learning?

MINDSET ABOUT WRITING

Carol S. Dweck identified two categories of mindset: growth and fixed. Growth mindset is the belief that intelligence is a changeable attribute. When someone has a growth mindset, they see setbacks as opportunities for growth and criticism as valuable feedback. On the other hand, someone with a fixed mindset views setbacks and criticism as evidence of their innate level of intelligence (Dweck).

When students say, "I'm a bad writer" or "I can't do math," they are articulating a fixed mindset about those skills. However, mindset is not a strict binary. A student can have a fixed mindset in one aspect of their life while simultaneously approaching another with a growth mindset. According to Dweck, we can change our mindset regarding our intelligence, skills, and abilities. When we change our mindset, we also change our learning experience. Writing centers operate with a growth mindset—we start from the assumption that writing is a skill that students can improve.

Yves Karlen and Miriam Compagnoni hypothesized that students with a growth mindset would have a greater diversity of self-regulated learning strategies, as well as a greater knowledge and use of metacognitive learning strategies in their writing, than students with a fixed mindset. In their study, they found that this was partially true. Among their participants, growth mindset was most strongly correlated with the use of planning and monitoring strategies for writing, such as outlining. They also found that mindset might affect the use of metacognitive learning strategies during only certain phases of students' writing processes.

Laura K. Miller wondered whether writing center consultants can help change student mindsets related to writing and tested an intervention to find out. A course-embedded consultant delivered a lesson about mindset to one section of a class and then met once with each student for a consultation on a literature review assignment. Miller found that those in the intervention class significantly changed their mindset from fixed to growth. They also improved more on the literature review assignment than students who were not in the intervention group. A relatively small intervention had the potential to positively change students' mindsets toward writing (Miller).

Traci Freeman and Steve Getty took a different approach and investigated whether mindset, along with sense of belonging, played a role in whether students visited the writing center in the first place. They found that mindset and belonging likely impact students' decisions regarding writing center visits, but also that student motivations around help-seeking behaviors are understandably complex. They also raise an important question based on Miller's intervention: if writing center consultants can inspire students to embrace a growth mindset toward writing, can a writing center visit also cause a student to develop a more fixed mindset?

If mindset impacts how students approach writing tasks and whether they seek help with writing, then we should ask similar questions about the relationship between GenAI and mindset toward writing. Could using GenAI in a consultation encourage students to develop a growth mindset? Or might the opposite be true, and using GenAI could lead students to see writing skill as fixed? Students might wonder why they should learn to write if GenAI can more quickly generate text. While in the writing center, we know that the best way to

learn to write is to engage in the process of writing, students often focus more on the final product. GenAI can lead students to circumvent that process in favor of quickly creating a product. Furthermore, students may not fully embrace the idea that writing is not just rhetorical but also social; writers are always writing for an audience (Roozen). With its lack of contextual awareness, GenAI cannot write for an audience as well as a human can. GenAI mimics audience awareness when it synthesizes its training data into generated output, but connecting with an audience requires authenticity, not just mimicry.

Consultants can model a growth mindset not only about writing but also about using GenAI. A growth mindset approach to GenAI centers the writer, not the technology. Consultants should openly acknowledge GenAI's limits and emphasize the need to employ critical thinking skills when assessing outputs. Kirkwood Adams and Maria Baker's usage-narrative (this collection), a process intended to make students' engagement with GenAI visible through metacognitive questioning, offers one strategy that consultants can use to help students approach GenAI with a growth mindset that centers their agency as users and writers.

When helping students who are using GenAI, consultants should approach prompt-writing as its own genre of writing to which students' previous writing skills can be applied. GenAI may respond to a prompt quickly, but the initial result is rarely exactly what a user is looking for. Overly broad and generalized prompts often generate less useful outputs. Using GenAI for a writing task requires having a clear goal in mind and following a recursive, multistep process of assessing outputs and revising prompts. Consultants can help students articulate what they want to achieve with GenAI, then guide students through analyzing the rhetorical situation of their GenAI use, much like they do when discussing student papers. This might include asking students to talk about what prompt they want to input and explain what kind of output they expect or hope to see as a result, then comparing the actual output to their expectations.

An effective prompt often includes: a clear task or role for GenAI; a specific format for the output; and context or examples (Bowen and Watson; Giray). It may also be helpful to describe the user's role (e.g., "I'm a first-year college student"). If the GenAI tool provides too much information for the learning context, students can build stops or pauses into their prompts (e.g., "Respond with 'I understand' and wait for the next set of instructions before you begin"). A detailed prompt is more likely to generate a usable output. When consultants understand the structure and conventions of an effective prompt, they can teach students using the same methods they would when teaching any other writing convention. This approach can encourage students to see how their actions directly impact GenAI outputs and help them maintain agency over their writing processes.

DIRECTIVE AND NONDIRECTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Experienced consultants use a range of both directive and nondirective instructional strategies. Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Thompson analyzed the tutoring conversations of experienced writing center consultants and found that consultants most often used three instructional strategies: telling, suggesting, and explaining. Directive strategies are those in which the consultant provides explicit instructions for how to accomplish a task. While telling and suggesting are both directive instructional strategies, suggesting includes elements of mitigation that allow students to save face and maintain ownership over their writing. Nondirective strategies are those in which the consultant guides a student as they determine what to do on their own. Explaining is a nondirective strategy in which the consultant provides reasons or examples for specific writing advice or conventions (Mackiewicz and Thompson).

GenAI could support consultants' use of instructional strategies in several ways. When explaining a concept, consultants might use GenAI to quickly generate examples, such as a list of sentences featuring comma splices. They can also ask GenAI to rewrite a paragraph in different ways, changing the tone, voice, or audience. Consultants can then initiate a conversation with the student in which they discuss the different features of the examples and how to apply what they learn in their own writing. Consultants could also use GenAI to quickly reword any explanations that students are struggling to understand. In these examples, GenAI outputs are the starting point for a conversation between the student and consultant.

SCAFFOLDING IN WRITING CONSULTATIONS

Directive strategies are often a first step in helping a student write independently, interwoven with nondirective strategies. Using nondirective strategies requires that consultants respond to new information as they work with the student, something GenAI can't really do. Consultants can more easily switch between directive and nondirective methods as needed during a consultation. However, there may be ways consultants can use GenAI to support their use of nondirective tutoring.

Scaffolding underlies many of the nondirective tutoring strategies consultants use with students. Scaffolding "metaphorically refers to a learning opportunity in which a more expert tutor teaches a less expert student to answer a question, correct an error, or perform a task without telling the student the answer or doing the work for him or her" (Mackiewicz and Thompson 54). In a writing consultation, the role of a consultant is to "establish what the student already

knows and what the student is learning so that the consultation can be focused on building the scaffolding or structure for the student to practice under supervision those skills that are in development" (Nordlof 58).

In their study of tutoring conversations, Mackiewicz and Thompson describe two types of scaffolding that consultants use: cognitive and motivational. Cognitive scaffolding strategies require that students think through a challenge, and motivational strategies encourage students to persist in their task. Mackiewicz and Thompson found that consultants most often used the cognitive scaffolding strategies of pumping (withholding part of an answer or asking leading questions), reading out loud, and responding as a reader to "give students opportunities to figure out what to do on their own" (56). Consultants' motivational scaffolding techniques included showing concern, praising, and reinforcing students' ownership of their writing (Mackiewicz and Thompson).

If we know that scaffolding is an effective method for helping students improve as writers, then can we use GenAI to support consultants' use of cognitive or motivational scaffolding? When considering this question, we need to remember the limitations of current GenAI tools, particularly that GenAI does not have true contextual understanding and cannot pivot in response to new information (at least, not without a human prompting it to do so). The ability to adapt teaching methods when students show improvement and respond when new challenges arise is foundational to effective scaffolding. If consultants use GenAI for scaffolding, the purpose should be to support the student as they work through writing tasks on their own.

Two of the cognitive scaffolding techniques Mackiewicz and Thompson describe, pumping and responding as a reader, provide a potential set of instructions for incorporating GenAI. If students prompt GenAI with instructions to respond only with questions that seek further information, consultants can guide students as they respond to a nearly endless supply of pumping questions. The student does not even need to respond to the AI to get more questions. The consultant acts as quality control, preventing GenAI from leading the student in an unproductive direction. Then consultants can use their contextual knowledge to build on the AI-generated questions in conversation with the student.

Similarly, students can prompt GenAI to respond to their writing as a specific audience and provide feedback or ask questions. The hypothetical audience could be experts in the topic or highly skeptical of the paper's thesis. The consultant would then engage the student in conversation to judge whether GenAI has accurately represented the potential audience for a piece of writing and guide the student as they critically reflect on the generated reader response.

Of the motivational scaffolding strategies that Mackiewicz and Thompson describe, reinforcing students' ownership of their writing is a strategy that might

work well in conjunction with GenAI. For example, Matthew Grendel et al. note that having a revision plan at the end of a consultation can significantly reduce student stress related to writing and improve motivation to continue writing. Students can use GenAI to generate a draft revision plan based on the student's current stage of writing, goals they've outlined with their consultant, and any relevant due dates. Then the consultant and student can review the draft revision plan together, adapting for the student's schedule and writing processes. Using GenAI to collaboratively construct writing tools, such as a revision plan, could help students engage in metacognitive reflection on their writing processes and encourage them to actively participate in planning for future writing.

CONCLUSION

Navigating the role of technology in writing processes is not new to the field of writing center studies (Bryan). Furthermore, GenAI has not fundamentally changed the challenges we face as educators who teach and tutor writing; it has amplified existing challenges. Many of these challenges come down to timing and motivation. Students' motivation to write does not always align with the time they are in class or the semester in which they take a writing-heavy class (North). When the motivation to write does not align with the time in which it needs to be done, then some students feel pressured to seek shortcuts. GenAI hasn't changed this dual challenge of timing and motivation, but it has made it much easier for students to use GenAI as a shortcut on a much larger scale than before.

These are challenges that we have long dealt with in writing centers. In fact, when a student chooses to visit their campus writing center, very often "they are genuinely, deeply engaged with their material … they are motivated to write" (North). This remains as true today as it was in 1984 when Stephen North first wrote those words in his 1984 essay, "The Idea of a Writing Center." It's why writing centers are well-positioned to shape how GenAI affects our work in the future. Past research shows us how to use GenAI as another tool in our consultants' toolkit and reminds us to always ensure that writers, not just writing, remain the focus of our work.

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