

Tutors' Column: "Harnessing the Power of GenAI"

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In the spring semester of 2023, I had an eye-opening tutoring session while working with a writer struggling with writer's block. I recommended the writer, J, do five minutes of free writing to tap into their knowledge of the written piece, and this prompted a conversation that revealed J's vulnerability. J expressed their frustrations with trying to meet tight deadlines awhile questioning their potential to convey thoughts effectively as a writer. The way J could convey their paralyzing fear that had become writer's block made the human connection visible. In writing centers, we value human connections, but we also value technology and tools. In this consultation, I realized J might benefit from both human encouragement and technological aids. At the end of the session, I told J to prompt ChatGPT for more suggestions that could address writer's block, encouraging them to chat with the software and to explore new ideas that could guide their paper. J approved of the suggestion and showed eagerness to tap into the chatbot's extensive knowledge. J did not return for a follow-up but their tone suggested enough confidence to complete the task.

The session was eye-opening to me since it integrated human and digital elements in ways I hadn't really experienced before. I know many students, faculty, and staff—including those who work in writing centers—are worried about Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) technology. However, writing centers have long embraced innovative technologies as a way to enhance human relationships and increase accessibility in writing. For example, more than a decade ago, Tammy Conard-Salvo and John M. Spartz recognized the value of technologies such as text-to-speech software when used in writing centers. They claimed that writers benefit from sessions that include both "face-to-face interactions with qualified tutors" and "technology that enables [the writer] to examine and revise their documents in new ways" (53). These scholars found value in blending technological applications and human interactions. While their words predate technological advancements such as the GenAI tools available today, the value of this integration remains. The use of GenAI in writing centers can enhance tutoring sessions when there is intentional focus on combining digital tools with human connection.

There is the need for both digital and human connection in writing center spaces. The writing center, with its access to computers and the internet, provides a doorway to the digital world that should not be taken for granted. In her essay "Who is Allowed to Be Tutored?," Dilan Mahoney describes how writers made appointments in the writing center where she tutored to enhance their digital knowledge of "working in modern word processors, navigating online assignment submission requirements, and discovering sources through digital databases" (16). The need for digital connection in education has only grown with the onset of GenAI tools like Chat GPT, Gemini, and Quillbot, to name a few. These tools provide writing assistance for students, but scholars agree that there is an urgency for students to be trained on how to use these tools effectively (Tantivejakul et al. 532; Teng 1). Writing centers can meet these demands for digital

connection, but they can do so in a way that prioritizes humanistic inquiry and increased accessibility.

Writing center tutors offer an essential human element. In her *WLN Tutors' Column*, Abigail Patchen highlights the humanization of the writing process in the writing center, mentioning how “one of the most effective forms of support we can provide is a good conversation” (21). Patchen remains skeptical of GenAI, framing tutors as “competing with AI” in the writing center; however, I argue that GenAI and the humanistic qualities of the writing center are not mutually exclusive. In fact, integrating GenAI into writing center sessions may enhance conversation and lead to deeper human connections. Muhammad Shidiq, in their research on AI and creativity, makes a similar claim, arguing that “there is a role that cannot be replaced by the ChatGPT system, which involves communicative interactions between teachers and students” (356). This role can be seen even more clearly through tutor-tutee interactions in the writing center space, which tend to be more personal than teacher-student ones. However, our focus does not need to be on one or the other—human interaction or GenAI. Instead, it should be on blending both. Through integration, the needs for digital and human connection can be met through the writing center.

Tutors can also model how GenAI enhances, rather than detracts, from creativity in the writing process. In a study investigating Thai students' responses to the use of GenAI in academic and professional writing, students perceived GenAI to lack originality and creativity despite being a helpful tool (Tantivejakul et al. 532). However, the limitations in GenAI perceived by the students could be limitations in their knowledge and use of these tools. One student, Sahin, claims that a deficit of “how-to” knowledge discourages individuals from fully adopting an emerging technology (qtd. in Tantivejakul et al. 529). These students could have benefitted from demonstrations of creative use of GenAI to enhance their how-to knowledge of the AI tool.

Dani Lester provides an example of how she shared this kind of how-to knowledge in one of her writing center sessions, leading to more creative approaches to inquiry and discovery. She prompted ChatGPT to provide reasons for pursuing an English degree to help a writer overcome writers' block. None of the five responses yielded were satisfactory to the tutor, yet she used them as examples to discuss what she personally believed to be worthwhile motivations to pursue an English degree. Lester reflects on the effect of her approach: “The student seemed surprised at how I used ChatGPT. They used GenAI to get (seemingly) accurate answers, whereas I used it to generate a disagreeable answer that inspired me to respond” (22). Lester's approach helped the writer learn how to engage with the writing tool with more critical thinking and creativity, showing how writing centers are spaces where this creative modeling of GenAI could happen.

Using GenAI tools to facilitate brainstorming and enhance the writing process is another way to develop writers' critical thinking during consultations. Auto-Peer, a computational tool developed by Philip McCarthy, is an example of such a tool. This free, peer review software not only offers writers feedback but also states that it fosters their critical thinking with an aim “to improve writing excellence” (Auto-Peer). Once the tool identifies writing issues, it provides the writer with different options to respond to the feedback: “This issue doesn't need any changes because I think the identified issues are good as they are”; “This issue may need some changes, but I am unsure as to how to make those changes”; “My instructor confirms that this is not an issue that needs modifying”; “This issue is not relevant to my paper”; and “Other.” Tutors using this tool could spend less time identifying issues in a writer's paper and dedicate more time probing the writer's reasoning behind their writing process. In this way, tutors would mix digital and human inputs to achieve the goal of supporting a writer's long-term development as suggested by Patchen (21).

There is a lot of potential in GenAI that tutors can harness to enhance writing center sessions today. It is essential that educational administrators and center directors acknowledge this potential and invest in training tutors with this know-how. Workshops and training sessions realized by writing centers should focus on GenAI literacy. Tutors and writers of the future will look back at us and thank us for taking these steps.

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