

Nuancing Resilience for the Post-Pandemic Writing Center Community

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Abstract

The term ‘resilience’ is frequently utilized to explain the writing center (WC) experience because so many of writing center programs have to fight for scarce resources. Yet, only one scholar, Neal Lerner (2019) has attempted to define the concept for the field. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, this term has taken on new importance for the writing center field. As Lerner’s study preceded the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and because of the rise in the number of CFP’s asking for writing center administrators to describe their pandemic adaptation plans, this paper argues that linking resilience with online migrations for the purposes of addressing the impact of the pandemic risks creating an uncritical stance that does not consider issues like digital access, digital literacy, implications for writing center pedagogy, and the fact that ‘resilience’ remains largely undefined in writing center scholarship. I speak to this gap by exploring and analyzing writing center administrator and tutor blog reflections using Lerner’s resilience model in order to further nuance the meaning of resilience in writing center scholarship. This study offers WC scholars who seek to unpack vaguely defined yet commonly used terms like ‘resilience’ the opportunity to understand how they might embed digital literacy in future pedagogical conversations and writing center tutor training.

Keywords: writing centers, writing center administration, resilience, COVID-19, digital literacy

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a surge of Call for Proposals asking writing center (WC) practitioners to report on how/whether they were faring. Most of the proposals included words like “online,” “digital,” and “resilience,” and other language that (un)intentionally connects and frames resilience as predicated on a shift towards online tools to in order to continue tutoring virtually. Creating online tutoring platforms, especially during a pandemic for writing centers that have never previously used online tutoring, signifies resilience; however, the proposals’ emphasis on online tutoring inadvertently revealed how much more work is needed to define and operationalize resilience in the writing center field, especially when considering communities where digital access and digital literacy issues might be a challenge.

Many how-to articles surfaced to support the writing center online migration during the early part of the pandemic (Feibush; Eleftheriou). However, only a handful of scholars in the writing center community pressed for critical reflection of the move to online tutoring. In her blog “Rethinking What to Preserve as Writing Centers Move Online” (2020), Lisa Bell cautioned that “even as we celebrate how rapidly we have provided access to writing center services online, we need to ask what kind of learning environment we have created and for whom.” However, even Bell did not question linking resilience to a center’s ability to work online during the pandemic.

In this study, I examined the seemingly uncritical connecting of resilience and writing center’s migration to online and virtual formats implied in many CFPs during the pandemic by analyzing WC practitioners’ reflections on how their centers navigated the online migration during the pandemic. These reflections, which I found on the *Connecting Writing Centers Across Borders* blog, shared the challenges and successes borne of writing center online migration. I synthesized the challenges and successes in order to deduce conclusions about a) the

operationalization of resilience concept, b) the state of digital literacy, and c) the state of digital access in the writing center community. By using Lerner's resilience model to analyze these stories, I found that WCs' resilience was challenged by a lack of communication literacy and limited digital access and that writings centers' successful navigation of these challenges demonstrates resilience.

Through this preliminary study, I start to fill the gap -- the lack of a clear definition of resilience in writing center scholarship. This study will also help WC administrators learn about the implications of communication literacy for tutor training, and it will shed light on the digital experiences of writing centers *outside* the North American context thus enriching previous WC scholarship. This article is organized in five parts: a literature review which also includes a conceptualization of resilience, a methods section, a results section, a discussion section which analyzes the role of digital literacy as revealed in the challenges and successes, and a conclusion section in which I offer by re-operationalization of resilience using Lerner's resilience model.

Literature Review

Defining Resilience as a Concept and within Writing Center Work

Neal Lerner has offered the WC field a definition of the term 'resilience' by drawing from Davis and Uffer's (2013) urban resilience model to define as having four variables:

[1] metabolic flows which are the production, supply, consumption of knowledge about tutoring, learning of the particular roles that tutors and students perform, [2] governance networks which are the micro and macro structures ideally collaborative, that make decisions, determine policy and practice, and ensure day-to-day functioning, [3] social dynamics which are the dynamic mix of students, faculty, staff [from various backgrounds],

and [4] built environment which is the virtual [and physical] writing centers that offer synchronous and asynchronous consulting (Lerner 204).

Lerner also adds that resilience entails writing center's "resistance" approaches to institutional policies and practices. However, he stops short of exemplifying the relationship among these four even as he argues that the way they relate to each other demonstrates how a writing center could "counter the [writing center's] unquestioning assertions of resilience and resistance" (Lerner 204).

On the other hand, from the field of urban studies, Hartmann et al who review literature on workplace individual and team resilience define resilience as a multi-faceted concept involving "the manifestation of positive outcomes [and] the actual experience of diversity [as well as] the mechanisms [that] individuals and teams draw on to deal with adversity" (947). Thus, though Lerner's definition of resilience is reminiscent of a network of intricately inter-connected actors, systems, and materials, both Lerner and Hartman et al emphasize the intentional interaction of people, action, and materials to create a resilient space. In this paper, I consider the "mechanisms" (Hartmann et al 947) to be the digital platforms and tools that writing centers use to navigate pandemic. I also show that the "learning of the roles that tutors and students perform" (Lerner 204) is evident in the reflections that writing center tutors and directors shared. Thus, I draw on both authors' conceptualization of resilience in these and other ways though I largely align my analysis with Lerner's definition.

Throughout its history, the writing center has demonstrated resilience in how it has adapted to large-scale trends that impact educational contexts. For instance, the center's 90s creation of online writing labs (OWLs) was an act of resilience by adapting to educational institutions' demands to use computers for learning. The extensive research exploring the OWLs

and their impact on writing center theory and practice (Martinez & Olsen; Neaderhiser & Wolfe, Rilling) showed that the field of writing center work is not necessarily unquestioning and uncritical in its adaptation to change. Rather, the field is deliberative and critical ensuring that it remains true to its core principles.

A more recent opportunity to embody resilience is the debate to reframe writing centers as multiliteracy centers. Some scholars like Trimbur observed that writing centers play a key role in supporting certain students' digital literacy. With the increase in non-traditional assignments, many students bring multimodal assignments to the writing center expecting a focus on the product while moving away from writing as a process (Trimbur 89). He suggested that an increasing focus on the digital and multimodal necessitates reframing writing centers as multiliteracy centers if they are to remain relevant and adapt to this trend (Trimbur 89).

Defining Digital Literacy and Digital Access in the Global Writing Center Context

Since digital trends have affected change in the center causing the latter to demonstrate its relevance and resilience in higher education, two additional concepts are relevant in the discussion about resilience in the writing center: digital literacy and digital access. The former is mentioned by Trimbur and Bancroft in relation to writing centers' roles indicating that it is not a novel concept in the writing center discourse. For the purposes of my study, I focus on one aspect of digital literacy: communication literacy. As explained by Covello, communication literacy is when [users] can use "digital technologies to communicate effectively as individuals and work collaboratively in groups, using publishing technologies, the Internet, Web 2.0 tools, and technologies" (qtd in Reddy, Sharmar, and Chaudhary 84). (As I will show later, tutors who struggled to adapt to online tutoring during the pandemic seemed to lack communication literacy.)

The other concept, digital access, is also not new in writing center discourse. Since my study focuses on the global writing center community, I find Hodges, Ronesi, and Zenger consideration of digital access pertinent. They describe it as a “multidimensional problem faced by writing students, instructors, and scholars” and explain how linguistic and cultural differences can impact access to online materials (51). Focusing on writing centers in the Middle East and North African (MENA), where communities were multilingual and different languages are used for instruction, the authors found that there is lack of access to digital journals for writing centers “in resource-challenged countries” (Hodges, Ronesi, & Zenger 53). As such, U.S.-centric terminology about literacy and language like “first language” and “second language” are not as helpful in the MENA context (qtd in Hodges, Ronesi, & Zenger 44, 49). I add that even the publication of journals in English, the dominant language in the West and North America, excludes access for writers and writing center professionals in this region.

In this study, communication literacy and digital access are linked to resilience because of the context within which resilience is analyzed, namely the use of online tools to navigate the pandemic. The study investigates the way resilience was nuanced by issues like communication literacy and digital access when writing centers’ reflections on their experiences about navigating the pandemic were analyzed.

Method

For my study, I used blog reflections found on the COVID-19 subpage of the *Connecting Writing Centers Across Borders*, a blog of WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship. I chose the blog genre for my data because of how blogs reveal patterns in community narratives and embody the interdependent relationship between the members’ individual thought and the

community's collective thought (Ross). The blog posts were in response to the following CFP which has been truncated for the purposes of this study.

WLN Journal's CFP for blog post reflections on writing centers' coping experiences during COVID-19:

The editors of *WLN* would like to create a space to gather and record your reflections and impressions on how Covid-19 has impacted your writing centers. We recognize the devastating impact that the virus has caused to writing centers as staff fall ill, budgets are cut, positions are furloughed... But we are certain that writing center professionals will want to reflect upon, learn from, and understand how we experienced this moment and its impact on our services, users, and our futures. We also know that writing centers will prevail and in some situations emerge stronger with renewed clarity of purpose or strengthened value to the campus community. For the responses, which will be published on the *WLN* blog, we are interested in capturing your reflections on any potential positive outcomes that have or may emerge from the impact of Covid-19 plus new solutions, approaches, and/or strategies that have worked for you.

We are inviting short submissions of 500-750 words from directors, tutors, and even frequent writing center users. Please submit them through the *WLN* website: wlnjournal.org, preferably by August 1, 2020, and choose "other" as the type of submission.

Here are some possible prompts:

- [other questions]
- When your writing center returns to its physical space, what will you change, add, or revise after experiencing being online as the only way to interact with writers? For example, will you add or continue to have online accessibility?
- What has been your experience with online technology, and what would you recommend and why?
- What tutoring adaptations have you and your tutors made when tutoring online? Why?
- For writing center users: how has your experience with the writing center been enhanced through online interaction? Or how has the writing center helped you through the shift to online learning as a consequence of Covid-19?
- If you have tested or used multiple platforms, such as Zoom, GoToMeeting, Skype, FaceTime, etc., what are the various advantages and/or disadvantages?

Protocol for collecting blog articles

Since my interest is in how writing centers showcased their resilience through tutoring online, I searched for blog posts that contained information about online tutoring solutions used

to address the pandemic-induced challenges that the writers' students and writing centers were facing. Due to my ease of access as Associate Editor of the blog and the fact that this subpage was set up specifically for the global writing center community to commiserate about their COVID-19 experiences, I chose to use the 'COVID-19' subpage (linked here: [COVID 19 – Connecting Writing Centers Across Borders \(CWCAB\) \(wlnjournal.org\)](https://wlnjournal.org/COVID-19-Connecting-Writing-Centers-Across-Borders-CWCAB/)) as my source for the blog posts. (My bias is limited since I was not involved in the creation of the CFP above or the selection of the blog posts to include on the blog's subpage. That work was done by the Assistant Editor of the blog and the Editor-in-Chief of the blog's parent journal).

I used the following key words: COVID-19, online tutoring, international, challenges, and I found 22 articles. I refined the search with the key words "COVID-19" and "call" to ascertain that I had not missed any article fitting my study's scope. This yielded one more article bringing the total to 23. Then, I conducted a close reading of each article to identify and remove articles whose content focused on an individual's experiences as opposed to collective center experiences. I wanted to understand how whole groups of tutors/directors in a given center evaluated their experience coping with the pandemic. With this final step in article collection, my final count of articles was twenty and these are the ones I analyzed.

Sorting articles

Because each blog article states who the writer is, their writing center's name, and the writing center's location. I initially sorted the articles using the writing centers' geographical location (see Figure 1 below). This was to find out what kind of global representation was evident in the data collected. I then re-sorted each geographical location's blog posts by author. I did this using an excel spreadsheet in which I created a column called 'author of blog post' and added the necessary number of rows, whereby each row contained information about the article's

author. For instance, from the U.S. location which had eleven articles, eleven rows were created in the second column – each row had the name of the author(s) who contributed an article from that location:

Geographical Location	Number of Writing Center Articles Collected
Canada	1
Kuwait	1
Lebanon	2
Norway	1
United States of America	11
South Africa	4
TOTAL	20

Fig 1: The geographical locations of the writing centers

Content post sorting and analysis

After sorting the blog posts into geographical locations, I did another close reading of each blog post and identified specific passages (i.e. sentences and phrases) which described any of the following: the writing center's **response** to pandemic-induced challenges (i.e. the actual steps taken by the center to respond to the challenges experienced as a result of the pandemic), the **results** of the writing center's response, and the writing center's **lessons/takeaways**. I added three columns in the excel spreadsheet referenced above corresponding to the three topics above and copy-pasted each identified passage into its corresponding column. Once all the passages were copy-pasted into their corresponding columns, I re-read each passage within the excel file and decided that the passages about the results to the responses would be more useful for this study's purposes as they focused on the negatives and positives of the centers' responses to COVID-19. I re-read and coded those passages for any unique result, that is, any unique result that was clearly expressed as such. Once all the unique results were coded, I regrouped them into

challenges or successes. (I used the context of the result's passage within a blog post as well as my perception of the author's attitude towards the result to determine whether the result was a negative [challenge] or a positive [success]).

All challenges and successes of a given geographical location were then re-sorted by deleting redundant/repeated mentions (see Figure 2 below). The final step was to review the synthesis of challenges and successes and deduce any challenges and successes that occurred across all or in a majority of centers across the geographical locations as well as any challenges and successes that were unique to writing centers from a specific location.

Writing Center Location	Synthesis of coded challenges	Synthesis of coded Successes
Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tutor's perceived inadequacies • Perceived reduction in sense of community among tutors • Difficulty building rapport with students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expansion of tutors' resources
Kuwait	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty communicating with students 	X
Lebanon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapting WC Pedagogy to online environment • Adapting WC pedagogy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in student consultations • Expanding writing centers' relevance
Norway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty building rapport with students • Adapting WC Pedagogy to online environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversifying of students served
United States of America	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of training for online tutoring • Decrease in student consultations • Initial decrease in student consultations • Tutors' stress with navigating uncertainty • Reduction in student consultations • Difficulty building rapport with students • Lack of network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanding writing center's relevance • Increase in student interest • Increase in student consultations

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of digital technologies • Inadequate home learning environment • Lowered effectiveness of tutoring • Tutors' perceived inadequacy • Time • Difficulty communicating with students 	
South Africa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of training for online tutoring • Inadequate home learning environment • Lack of digital technology • Lack of training for online tutoring 	X

Fig 2: The codes of challenges and successes per geographical location

Results

After reviewing all the descriptions of writing center responses to the pandemic, I found that most of the 20 writing centers adapted both asynchronous and synchronous virtual tutoring and most used Skype, Zoom, emails, and their institutions' approved e-learning systems like Blackboard Collaborate. One writing center reported using WhatsApp and another used Google Meets. I also found that all writing centers, even the ones who already had an established OWL, reported challenges in adapting to online tutoring. Looking at figure 2 above, I deduce that there are three main common challenges and one main success experienced across the twenty writing centers during their transition to working/tutoring online during the pandemic.

Challenge 1: Difficulty in adapting writing center pedagogy to online spaces

In various writing center reflections, many authors reported that their tutors had trouble understanding and communicating with their students in online spaces because, without the f2f-dependent strategies and tutoring approaches they were accustomed to, tutors had to re-purpose

their communication and tutoring skills to the online environment. This struggle manifested through tutor complaints about taking twice as long to provide feedback in online tutoring compared to f2f sessions, concerns about students' inability to understand feedback provided asynchronously e.g. via emails, comment bubbles in Microsoft Word, and online chat tools, and concerns about failing to communicate with students. Passages 1, 2, and 3 below exemplify this:

Passage 1:

“the lack of visual or physical cues, such as facial expressions and tone of voice, made it difficult for the consultants to understand the student and the meaning they might have had behind the text, challenges were by far more commonly reported than successes” (Author from WC in Kuwait)

Passage 2:

“advisers spent twice as much time as usual because they were trying to provide written feedback with the same depth as their in-person verbal conversations. Advisers were concerned about their ability to build rapport and maintain connections with students asynchronously, without seeing each other even virtually face-to-face, and worried that their feedback might read as disconnected or flat in tone.” (Author from WC in the U.S.)

Passage 3:

“Engaging students in dialogue, however, seemed significantly more difficulty during digital compared to face-to-face sessions...[there was] less nuanced language with a tendency for tutors to provide answers rather than invite students to reflect upon their questions” (Author from WC in Norway)

This difficulty in understanding/communicating with students due to a change in communication methods and tutoring modalities was also demonstrated through tutors' complaints about their own perceived inadequacies in properly tutoring their students online. An author from writing center in the U.S. reported that their writing center surveyed tutors to understand their perceived challenges with dealing with the pandemic and found that “tutors thought they would [tutor] worse online” even though a corresponding survey of the students in that writing center reported that students felt satisfied with the tutors' efforts. A mismatch in

perceived tutoring abilities suggests that across writing centers, there was a concern of failing to appropriately transfer in-person tutoring practices to online spaces.

Challenge 2: Lack of access to digital tools (network, software, hardware etc.)

All five writing centers from South Africa reported this challenge compared to just 2 out of 11 writing centers from the U.S. And while all the authors who wrote about these writing centers in South Africa and the U.S. noted that moving online was complicated by varying levels of a lack of access to digital technology including hardware, software, and internet connectivity, the writers differed in their explanation of who lacked access. Writers from writing centers in South Africa reported that both tutors and students lacked access as passages 4 and 5 below show:

Passage 4:

"we live in deep rural areas where there is no network, so it's difficult to connect and do the work" (Author from WC in South Africa)

Passage 5:

"Communication is a challenge because online learning is not entirely accessible to learners....many students were left without sufficient network computer/laptops and smartphones. Not forgetting airtime and data expenses..." (author from South Africa)

In most cases, students were the ones lacking the access though some writing centers in South Africa noted that their institutions did not provide the tutors and their centers with the required digital tools to adequately migrate to online tutoring. Many called on governmental institutions to increase funding for online education programs. In the U.S. only 2 writing centers reported the challenge of lacking access to digital tools. Passage 6 below shows that this challenge was faced by tutors, not just students, and the writing center represented by the author in this passage used interdepartmental collaborations to resolve the problem:

Passage 6:

“Another challenge included ensuring all tutors had the technologies needed to work successfully from home; this required learning more about university resources, coordinating with other departments, and regularly checking in with tutors about internet access, computer capabilities, and availability of tools including earbuds or headphones” (Author from WC in U.S.)

Challenge 3: Varied digital literacy among tutors and students

Even among writing centers that had access to technology and funding, the challenge of training tutors and students so that they would be able to properly use the digital tools available to them was common. Here is how one author from a writing center in South Africa explained the challenge:

Passage 7:

“The observation of time wasted in online communication comes with technicalities and computer literacy in using online platforms. Technicalities consider sound functions, time lags, and background noise, as well as explaining the ‘share-screen’ function. Ultimately, one spends too much time talking about how to use the online platform, especially the ‘share-screen’ function, that delays the lesson...” (Author from WC in South Africa)

Success: An expansion of the writing center’s role

Two writing centers from the U.S. also reported becoming jacks of multiple trades besides writing tutoring. For instance, as showed in passage 10, some writing centers transformed into technical resource centers where students came to find help in using certain digital tools while passage 11 shows that some writing centers served specific communities of students who were uniquely impacted by the pandemic-induced travel restrictions.

Passage 10:

“The writing center quickly began serving the role of instructor as well as counselor, tech support and default resource, especially at the beginning of the transition” (Author from WC in the U.S.)

Passage 11:

“international students found refuge in the center because they could not return” (Author from WC in the U.S.)

Discussion

What do these challenges and successes teach us about how to nuance and operationalize resilience as a concept in the post-pandemic writing center’s discourse on use of digital technology to survive the pandemic? Lerner’s model of resilience offers some answers. Recall that, according to Lerner, resilience in the writing center is measured by the relationship between four factors:

- **metabolic flows** i.e. the ways in which “knowledge... about tutoring, learning, or the particular roles that tutors and students perform” is produced, supplied, and consumed (205)
- **governance networks** i.e. the institutional collaboration that results in the daily decision-making and policies and practices,
- **social dynamic** i.e. the range of students, faculty, and staff in the center,
- **built environment** i.e. the physical or virtual context within which the center offers services (205-206)

The built environment, social dynamics, and the governance networks interact when we consider the challenges facing the writing centers in South Africa. These five centers reported a lack of access to digital tools, and they all reflected on how this challenge was the result of limited governmental or university support in alleviating students’ financial burdens so that they could afford access to certain digital technologies. This in turn affected the centers’ social dynamics and the capacity to utilize OWLs when very few students could access them. Thus, coping with the pandemic was more challenging for these centers and their resilience was complicated by limited governance networks which in turn restricted the potential of a virtual

built environment and the constrained the social dynamics. As a result, connecting resilience only to the built environment fails to acknowledge the labor that these writing centers did in calling on their government officials for support and it fails to account for the scaffolding they did to support students who did not have access to digital tools. The resilience narrative needs to encompass these issues to better show the efforts that the global writing center community exercised.

Even the experiences of centers in U.S., Norway, and Lebanon complicate the concept of resilience by demonstrating that it needs to go beyond simply providing digital tools to tutors and students. They demonstrate the interaction between the built environment and the metabolic flows. For these centers, the difficulties of adapting writing center pedagogy to online spaces were exacerbated by facing students with varied digital literacy (challenges 1 and 3 respectively); at the same time, they along with one in Canada and Kuwait also reported an increase in their student participation and an expansion of the writing center's role (see success finding above). In other words, the centers' abilities to produce and supply information using the digital tools (metabolic flows) was further complicated by the need to build their virtual environment and then train their networks on how to use that environment, and these results affirm that this is also the space where communication literacy was lacking for many tutors.

As Challenge Two showed, tutors with low communication literacy struggled to meaningfully adapt F2F practices to online tutoring sessions. Thus, resilience for them meant re-learning these practices for an online space. For their administrators, resilience entailed adapting training that instills communication literacy. Indeed, all the centers reported this challenge in some form. The resilience, then, is more about the way these centers were able to balance their social dynamics, a built virtual environment, and their metabolic Through the analysis above, I

have attempted to nuance the link between resilience and use of online migration by WCs by showing that such a link must account for the digital, social, educational, and environmental challenges facing some centers in the global writing center community.

This study was small and therefore preliminary. Larger studies about writing centers' experiences with the pandemic need to be conducted to confirm the experiences and opportunities that have been explored above. Moreover, questions remain. In addition to considering how writing center pedagogy could be impacted by tutors' communication literacy, future writing studies and writing center scholarship needs to explore how communication literacy impacts resilience's metabolic flows within online writing labs. Scholars also need to expound on the way digital access affects writing centers and their students' communication literacy. Since the way reading and writing happens is context-specific, future scholars need to study the experiences of writing centers in non-Western contexts and find out how these centers and their students remain resilient in the face of linguistic, socio-cultural, and economic differences.

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