

Information Management Assessment for Odegaard Writing & Research Center

1. Overview of organization

The Odegaard Writing & Research Center (OWRC) at the University of Washington (UW) is one of the largest writing centers in the United States. In general, writing centers exist to give both struggling and flourishing students a place outside the classroom to improve their writing through activities like one-to-one tutoring, writing retreats, and workshops. While some writing centers are staffed entirely by professional writing instructors, the OWRC uses a 'peer tutoring' model and employs around 70 graduate and undergraduate students as its writing consultants. In the 2015-16 academic year the OWRC offered around 15,000 consultations, of which nearly 13,500 were used by about 4000 writers.

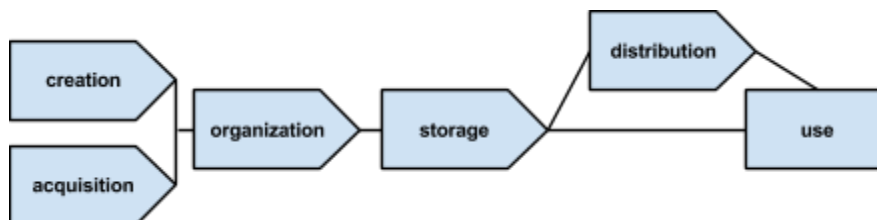
As a unit, the OWRC falls under the Department of English and reports to the Director of Writing and the OWRC board. The OWRC is held responsible for quantity of services provided, for general utilization of services, for utilization by specific subgroups of students, and (to a lesser extent) for student satisfaction. The OWRC is led by a full-time Director with support from a full-time administrative coordinator and part-time language learning specialist. In relation to the number of students employed and services provided, the number of professional staff is very low.

2. Overview of organization's information management

I worked at the OWRC as a writing consultant (2012-13), a student assistant director (2013-15), and most recently in a temporary part-time staff role as operations improvement specialist (2015-16). In these different capacities I observed the OWRC's information management (IM) activities across the information lifecycle described by Detlor (2010) and illustrated in figure 1.

The OWRC collects data on both tutors and writers who visit. Very little data is **acquired** from external sources; instead, data is **created** by writers when they book appointments, by tutors when they record appointments, and by professional staff when they document program activities and personnel information. In addition to data, OWRC activities also generate many documents (for example, promotional materials, training handouts, and employee handbooks). These documents are often created collaboratively by small working groups that involve tutors alongside professional staff, as the organization's management style has historically sought to include employees in decision-making and program design.

Figure 1. A visualization of Detlor's information lifecycle



Most OWRC data is input directly to a MySQL database through a web interface designed by English department IT staff. As such, this data is **organized and stored** simultaneously. The remaining data (mostly personnel data) was historically stored in spreadsheets, scattered across different computers and available in useful form only with much effort and delay. A second MySQL database was designed and deployed this summer to manage personnel data better. OWRC documents, finally, are stored in a shared folder on Google Drive. The documents are organized according to an organizational taxonomy (figure 2), with the exception of archives inherited from previous staff.

Some OWRC personnel—usually a team of about 10 people, both professional staff and students—**use** data and documents directly and must be individually familiar with the OWRC’s systems: how to access them, how to use them courteously and effectively, etc. The student members of this core group have a one-to-two-year tenure, so annual training is necessary to acquaint new members with their responsibilities. Many administrative processes are also documented in a handbook for reference and revision as needed.

As well as using and maintaining information themselves, an additional responsibility of this core team is **distributing** information to other less-involved personnel. This occurs through word of mouth, through trainings, and through an interactive tutorial hosted on an online learning management system.

Figure 2. *Organizational taxonomy for OWRC.*

[A] Tutor Professional Development: Programs that train tutors, mentor tutors, support tutor learning	
[A1] New Tutor Training	Mandatory training that all new tutors complete
[A2] Internal Workshops (shared)	Workshops offered outside of annual tutor training, including W7W
[A3] Staff Meetings	Monthly staff meetings
[A4] PDIs, Capstones, & Alumni Network	Programs for reflection and career preparation; includes tutor learning outcomes
[A5] Task Groups (shared)	Project work that doesn't fall under regular programs & services
[A6] Peer Mentoring	Observing sessions in the OWRC
[A7] Tutor Exchange	Observing sessions in other writing centers
[A8] Social Events	One-off events that are not regular professional development programs, e.g. movie nights
[B] Personnel Administration: Logistical support of tutors	
[B1] Hiring Processes	Everything related to hiring tutors and admins, including the Hiring Committee
[B2] Scheduling & Payroll	Quarterly scheduling of tutors' shifts, and tracking expenditure categories during payroll approval
[B3] Handbooks etc.	Staff directories; revising and archiving the need-to-know logistical info provided to tutors
[B4] Concierge & Tutor Info (shared)	Current version of info provided to tutors and concierges (e.g., handbooks)
[B5] Diversity	Diversity assessments and strategies for improving organizational climate
[B6] Personnel (very restricted access)	Pro-staff-only materials relating to tutors
[C] Admin Team Coordination: Keeping the admin team functioning	
[C1] Admin Meetings	Admin meeting minutes and best practices for meetings
[C2] AD Professional Development	AD role definition, admin retreats, AD discussions, leadership & productivity tips
[C3] Org Chart, Calendar, Documentation, Policies	Org charts, calendars, documentation, process improvement tools
[C4] Mission, Vision, Values, Culture, Strategy	Longer-term planning and organizational identity
[C5] Admins (very restricted access)	Pro-staff-only materials relating to organization or admin team
[D] Research, Assessment, Reporting, & Budgeting: Data and the reports, research, and requests that depend on it	
[D1] Research Literature (shared)	Library of articles we use in tutor training, operations improvement, research projects, etc.
[D2] Conferences & Publications	Sharing our research projects with a wider audience
[D3] Assessment (non-program-specific)	User satisfaction, user learning outcomes, and one-off assessment projects
[D4] Reporting	Board Reports, summaries of data for Board Reports, and reporting best practices
[D5] Finances	OWRC budget requests, grant & gift money proposals
[DX] Database	Temporary solution for sharing Reporting Database

[E] External Programs: Regular services other than one-to-one tutoring	
[E1] Targeted Learning Communities	Everything related to the TLC program
[E2] Health Sciences Library Satellite	Everything related to the HSL satellite center
[E3] College of Education Satellite	Everything related to the CoE satellite center
[E4] Dissertation Retreat	Annual week-long dissertation retreat
[E5] Writing Circles	Ongoing writing circles for graduate students and others with lengthy writing projects
[E6] Question Hour	Weekly drop-in for grammar questions, staffed by ELL Specialist
[E7] Instructor & Department Support	Materials for workshops for partners, e.g. Peer Review, WSA Prep, Honors Portfolio, JSIS Task Force
[E8] Workshops Direct-to-Students	Other workshops, .g. ELL Reading Strategies, Citation & Plagiarism, Intro. to American Academic Life

[F] Outreach & Partnerships: Marketing materials, partnerships, and one-time events	
[F1] Outreach Strategy	Planning our marketing and outreach efforts
[F2] Partnerships	Outreach to and through partners on- and off-campus
[F3] Class Visits	Outreach through class visits
[F4] Outreach Events	Outreach through events, e.g. Lonely Hearts of Yesteryear poetry open mic
[F5] Promotional Materials	Handouts, bookmarks, posters, logos, fliers, videos
[F6] Website Design	Content & planning for the website
[F7] Newsletter	Planning for annual newsletter to alumni and partners

3. Opportunities available through better information management

The OWRC stands to gain much from improved IM. In general, with so few professional staff supporting so many student employees, any reduction in administrative duties frees up staff to concentrate on mentoring, training, and supporting tutors, ultimately improving service quality. Perhaps more importantly, staff hours freed up by better IM can be spent networking and consulting for faculty on good writing instruction practices. Since many writers visit the writing center out of confusion caused by unclear or otherwise weak assignment prompts, outreach to faculty would constitute an upstream intervention. Or, in the case of professors who teach writing extraordinarily well, there may be collaborations that would amplify the impact of the OWRC (which has the ambitious vision of enriching and improving campus writing culture generally, not just serving individual writers).

Another opportunity resides in the fact that the OWRC has a truly unique window into the learning process of writers. The high volume of traffic translates to a very large sample size, with many student populations of interest represented; moreover, the one-to-one nature of the interactions mean they have considerable depth and substance. Better IM would enable this window to be put to use, primarily for the sake of academic research into student learning.

Better IM could also improve utilization through two primary channels. First, the OWRC's promotional efforts could be stronger. On a campus of this size, tracking the best outreach targets, their contact information, and relevant timelines is difficult; the OWRC currently lacks a current and usable outreach directory. Second, the OWRC lacks a waitlist mechanism that would notify interested writers of appointment openings from last-minute cancellations. Constructing a waitlist mechanism falls under the IM umbrella, as it involves making information available rapidly to users.

Finally, the OWRC needs better IM in order to evaluate its operations and make a stronger case to its board and funders. Accurately reporting services offered and utilized is challenging enough for an organization with the dynamics discussed in the following section; but, ideally, external stakeholders should be informed not only of these metrics, but user satisfaction and writing impact as well. These latter two metrics would strengthen the OWRC's case for more funding and staffing by demonstrating the OWRC's benefit to the University more convincingly.

4. Information management challenges faced

Major challenges lie between the OWRC and these promising opportunities. Many of the ubiquitous challenges identified by Robinson (2005) apply. For example, there are multiple IM platforms that aren't unified from the user perspective by a single login or common format; there are resource limitations that make investment in IM difficult; there is legacy data that must be reconciled with current database schemas to expose trends; and so on. In the context of the OWRC, many of these problems are caused by the unique challenges inherent to a largely student staff and from past management culture.

Students work short shifts scattered throughout the week. Their attention is nearly monopolized by their coursework. OWRC trainings, while necessary, must be kept minimal to respect the primacy of students' educational activities. Even so, OWRC trainings constitute information overload for preoccupied students. By the time students are familiar with policies, platforms and processes, they're graduating the University: the OWRC experiences 50% annual turnover (occasioned by graduation, not employee dissatisfaction). This means the OWRC is constantly struggling to inform and train its staff. Another dimension of difficulty is that *all* staff have data entry responsibilities associated with their appointment and must interact with the database's web interface. It's not possible, in other words, to restrict the OWRC's information systems to savvy and experience users.

For most of the OWRC's ten year history, its management culture placed utmost value on strong interpersonal relationships, authentic interactions, spontaneous moments of learning, and unfettered participation: everyone who sought one could have a voice in deliberation and decision-making. This style of management created a very warm, innovative, beloved organization with loyal and enthusiastic employees who excelled at improvisation and innovation. In terms of IM, though, there was little effort made to formalize systems and routinize processes. In addition, there was a managerial conviction that all data had potential value, so large quantities of unstructured qualitative data were frequently collected and stockpiled with no plans and, frankly, no capacity to process it. Newer management has begun to discriminate more in the realm of data collection and to embrace process documentation, but the magnitude of the necessary cultural shift is not small. The challenge of fostering a sense of responsibility for IM across the organization must be faced squarely.

References

Detlor, B. (2010). Information management. *International Journal of Information Management*, 30, pp. 103-108.

Robinson, J. (November 1, 2005). 10 principles of effective information management [Blog post]. Retrieved from http://www.steptwo.com.au/papers/kmc_effectiveim/