Reflection on the MU OWL

The Madonna University Online Writing Lab (MU OWL) was developed as a supplemental resource for the Madonna University Writing Center: www.madonna.edu/owl. It puts OLI theory into practice because of its focus on providing accessible online writing resources that are consistently reviewed and improved. In designing the MU OWL, my goal was to create something that could be used as a supplement for tutoring sessions while also providing writing resources to students if they needed help when they were not able to meet with a tutor. Since Madonna has undergraduate and graduate programs that range from fully on campus to fully online, the Writing Center needed to have a similar range of options for the resources it offers. Many of Madonna's online students (and commuter students who are taking individual classes online) live in the area, but their drive to campus could be an hour or more; they are also usually taking classes while balancing work and family commitments that make any amount of travel to campus problematic. The topics for the MU OWL were chosen with the help of suggestions from Writing Center tutors, first-year writing instructors, and faculty in different disciplines. Based on what I have learned so far regarding OLI principles, I consider the MU OWL to be a solid resource with room to continue growing and improving.

The MU OWL was designed with accessibility in mind. Although I am not an expert in how to make resources completely accessible, I educated myself on the basics, including choosing fonts that are considered accessible, ensuring the color contrast for text and backgrounds was high enough, adding alternative text to images, and making sure that all

videos had accurate captions. I used this knowledge to develop basic guidelines for the tutors who were helping me to follow when designing and revising materials, as well.

The MU OWL was originally built as a Blackboard Organization, yet over the course of the first year it was active I realized that was limiting some capabilities. In order to use the MU OWL, students had to log in to Blackboard, navigate through several steps to self-enroll in the organization the first time they used it, and then follow a multi-click process every time they wanted to use it thereafter before they could find the resources they needed. Although the site had been set up with accessibility as a key priority, accessing the site proved a deterrent. Therefore, I eventually got permission to migrate the MU OWL to the university website to increase its visibility and accessibility for students. That switch went live recently, and I am still assessing what is working and what needs improvement. The initial use of Blackboard meant I was able to take advantage of Blackboard Ally, a tool that rates materials in terms of accessibility; while it is not a guarantee of accessibility, it did provide an additional check. Blackboard Ally will assess any document uploaded to the LMS to ensure the appropriate tags, alt text, formatting, and color contrast have been used to make it easily readable and compatible with screen reader technology. While it has limitations in what it checks for and how it makes its assessments, it is helpful in identifying a baseline of accessibility for documents.

The MU OWL is only one-year old, with its iteration on the website mere weeks old, which means there is a great deal that still needs to be improved. The three areas that stood out to me while reviewing it with OLI principles in mind were that it is missing an orientation component, the PDFs are not mobile-friendly (problematic considering how many students

access their academic resources through smartphones), and there is no interactive content yet.

Witte's discussion of what students expect to see and how they navigate LMSs made me

wonder about how they will view the MU OWL and whether some sort of introductory video

might be necessary. Although it is now on the website, it originated in an LMS and some design

decisions were influenced by those initial constraints. In addition, while I have spent hours

moving items around and thinking about the best approaches to organization, including getting

feedback from the tutors, I am still not sure if it is the most user-friendly or intuitive design.

Rodrigo's chapter examining how often mobile-devices are used for accessing online writing

instruction prompted me to check how the MU OWL looked on my cellphone. I was

disappointed to realize the PDFs are not easily readable, and I need to do some research on

how to fix that. Finally, the MU OWL is lacking interactive content – while the videos are a step

in the right direction, they are far outnumbered by PDFs. Additionally, I am hopeful of finding

some interactive content that allows for a gamification component to engage students while

not sacrificing writing pedagogy for "whiz-bang" technology. Since the Universal Learning

Design principles and OLI Principles and Tenets emphasize the importance of the students'

experience and their abilities to have interactive experiences that present information in a

variety of formats, it seems important to include resources that go beyond only having text-

heavy handouts.

      The MU OWL has been an exciting project, from the initial needs assessment that led

me to realize how uneven the Writing Center's resources were for students who did not have

regular access to its physical location to designing and building the MU OWL in partnership the

Writing Center tutors. In many ways, studying the OLI principles has reassured me that it is on

the right track, even as it has provided me with insights into the areas that still need

improvement.