

On Brand: Communication Center Tutors as Social Media Content Creators

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Because social media is a significant factor in how students and faculty in higher education engage with the world, it is important for communication centers to consider this medium as a method to meet those audiences where they are. While there are challenges to creating a social media presence, this article argues that engaging your tutors in both developing your communication center's branding strategy and as content creators will help you address those challenges. Building your communication center's social media presence offers you not just an avenue to communicate the core values of your center to your institution, it is also an opportunity to develop your tutoring staff's intellectual engagement and enhance their professionalization.

Keywords: tutor training, social media, outreach, branding, communication strategies

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Why Social Media?

To modify Sutton's Law, if you want to communicate with people, go where the people are—and studies have shown that the people in higher education are on social media (Junco, 2014; Rowan-Kenyon & Alemán, 2016). Engaging with students and faculty across your institution is a fundamental principle of communication centers. You can't just build your center and expect people to know what it is and show up. The center's leadership needs to intentionally build a plan to engage with the larger community about how communication is at the "heart of the educational experience" (Steinfatt, 1986). And in the most practical sense, faculty and students don't just need to know where your center is, they also need to know why they should come, particularly since student apprehension is a significant barrier (Turner, 2015).

While social media has value, there are challenges to establishing a social media presence. First, the language of social media is specific and dynamic (McCulloch, 2019). Changes happen very quickly: what does "30-50 feral hogs" mean? What discourse is

current, what would sound "so 2014?"

Second, platforms change rapidly; some writing centers went all-in on Second Life as a platform in the mid-2000s (Buck, 2017), and that platform is now a "digital ruin" (Jamison, 2017). Vine was huge in 2014 and gone by 2017. TikTok is the "It" platform right now, but how long will it last (Herman, 2019)? So, what is the language your audience speaks, and where are they? And finally, creating social media content can feel risky; we all know the stories of social media fails that are at best, embarrassing, and at worst, deeply damaging. Justine Sacco and Steven Salaita are stark examples (Ronson, 2016; Petit, 2019).

Fortunately, communication center tutors are the best resource for engaging these challenges. They know the audience, the languages, and the medium, and with support they can create safe, authentic, and engaging content that communicates your goals for your center (Love, 2015). You can build a system around core values and reflective engagement that enables those who *can* do it best to do it thoughtfully and effectively. As Karen Head, director of Georgia Tech's Naugle CommLab, said at a recent International Writing Center

Association (IWCA) conference, “your students are your best ambassadors. Let them do the talking whenever possible.” You can build support structures that will allow your tutors to engage more deeply with the core values of your center and to create and manage content in a professional manner. We train tutors to be responsible professionals who work with students; we can help them find their voice to thoughtfully communicate what our centers do on social media.

Bringing Social Media into Tutor Training

Tutor training should inculcate your tutors with an understanding of what we do as a center, including core theoretical concepts and everyday practices to help them fulfill the center’s goals. Integrating a social media project into your professional development is an opportunity for your tutors to reflect on and discuss how you can craft your “brand” to communicate your center’s core values and mission, while also preparing them to be thoughtful content creators.

Defining Your Center’s “Brand”

A useful approach is to ask your tutors a simple question: “What’s our brand?” This question is at the core of most corporate approaches to social media marketing, in which you establish a message that communicates clearly across platforms (Pickering & Gartland, 2017; Miller, 2019). It is particularly powerful follow-up is to ask tutors about how they, as individual tutors, see their “personal brand” as a tutor intersecting with the center’s brand. Each tutor is a representative of your communication center, and each session is built on communicating the core values of a center. And many centers, of course, use tutors for class visits or other outreach presentations, since the peer engagement is

the value centers are built on. This “personal brand” approach is also useful because branding has recently become detached from corporate identity and become an individuated concept. “Personal branding” is not just common in business communication discourse (Montoya, 2003; Tolliday, 2015), but the concept of branding now runs very deeply in popular culture. Being “on-brand” has entered into conversational discourse to describe your everyday experience of “selfness,” building off the model of the individualized power of the social media “influencer” (Grenny, Patterson, Maxfield, McMillan, & Switzler, 2013; Hennessey, 2018). Urban Dictionary (2014) defines “on brand” as “something characteristic for the personal image (your brand) you are trying to project,” and in July 2018, the meme On Brand™ Childhood Stories began circulating on Twitter (Downer, 2018).

“Branding” can focus your tutor’s conversation on the substance of your center’s message, while also helping focus the clarity of your message and its appropriateness to both audience and media. It will also help your tutors see themselves as empowered “influencers” in your institution’s culture, which will help them be aware of their own responsibility. Social media influencers may have an ambivalent reputation, but they are powerful (Lein, 2019). Oliva Jade may not be the best role model, but she could be an excellent example with which to start a conversation about the power of personal branding with your tutors.

Case Study: Branding in Tutor Training

This essay’s approach to social media is based, primarily, on our experience at Auburn University, where we started a social media project in 2013 at the Miller Writing Center (MWC). The MWC is a WAC/WID center not attached to the Department of English, but part of a cross-

disciplinary writing initiative led by a free-standing Office of University Writing. Our tutors are hired from across campus to work with students from first year composition through doctoral dissertations, on any kind of communication project, including visual and oral presentations (we defined “writing” as “any medium used to communicate a message”). In 2013, this model had only been operating for a few years; we had about 45 peer tutors (from across disciplines, about 1/3 of whom were graduate students) and had about 1200 student users make around 2200 appointments per semester.

Social media emerged at the first meeting of the fall 2013 semester when we asked the peer tutors, in a reflective writing exercise, to consider “what goals should we be working towards as a center?” A significant number of our tutors during our discussion spoke enthusiastically about starting a social media presence.

So, we dedicated our first full 1-hour staff meeting to establishing what our MWC brand would be. As a prompt, we gave the staff two materials: 1) a promotional bookmark with one of our logos, “All Students. All Writing,” which we, the directors, had decided to adopt as our primary logo, and 2) a short and (at the time) recent *Forbes.com* essay “Build a Personal Brand, Not Just a Career” (Quast, 2012). We then broke the staff into small groups and asked them, in 10 minutes of discussion, to define what they thought the core messages that should be our brand. To stimulate creativity, we had them draw representations of those messages on large pads of paper which we could hang on the classroom walls.

We chose the *Forbes* article not just because it concisely defined the idea of a “personal brand,” but because its use of corporate jargon would be a sharp contrast to our center’s culture, and I felt it would help highlight what our “brand” should be.

When we brought the staff together to share their discussions (and their creative drawings), a clear pattern emerged (which we recorded). The staff identified “approachability” as the overall brand message, which was subdivided into four related elements 1) supporting the writer, not just fixing writing, 2) helping students overcome anxiety by demystifying the idea of writing, both in a broad theoretical sense (we’re all writers!) and with accessible surface-level writing “tips” 3) extending an explicit invitation to diverse writers from all disciplines— particularly STEM disciplines, and finally 4) project an attitude of “smart, but quirky,” with an emphasis on being literate in current pop culture. This is a common stylistic attitude for many writing and communication centers; if you go to the website for the Georgia Tech communication center, you’re likely to see their life-size Doctor Who poster prominently displayed, or the mirror ball hanging from the ceiling. The tutors were particularly invested in defining “what’s our brand?” because it wasn’t an abstraction, since we made it clear that the tutors were going to have the opportunity to be content creators.

Tutors as Content Creators

Putting tutors in charge of content creation can be worrisome. But we don’t throw tutors into working with students without training and support. We have regular training sessions and staff meetings. We have systems of administrative and peer observation to give formative feedback on best practices. We build a culture where tutors can support each other as they do the important work of supporting their fellow students as communicators. So, when we ask tutors to create and distribute social media content, we want to give them a system in which they can support each other as they take on this responsibility.

Building a discussion of “branding” into your tutor training is step one. As you move forward, you’ll want to 1) identify particularly motivated tutors, 2) give them structured time to work together to identify their interests and strengths as content creators and managers, 3) have a clear leadership structure so choices can be made in consultation with the Director, and 4) give guidance on building a sustainable plan. You’re asking your staff to take on a significant responsibility, so you should create a structure that respects the importance of that responsibility.

Case Study: A Tutor-led Social Media Committee

At the Miller Writing Center, we had two structures that allowed for this next step. 1) We had a “Lead Consultant” position that put undergraduate peer tutors in leadership roles in close communication with the director; 2) We had a committee system (with Lead Consultants serving as committee chairs) where tutors would collaborate on significant issues at the center, including hiring and professional development, with rules adapted from faculty-style shared governance (regular meetings, recorded minutes, etc.).

So, we added a Social Media Committee, under the leadership of Gabby, a senior Lead Consultant. In consultation with the director (myself), Gabby organized a meeting of the twelve tutors who expressed interest in this project and went into that meeting with a plan establish a content style guide, make choices for platforms, and develop a structure for producing regular content.

At that meeting, the committee agreed to create “Yeah, Write: The Miller Writing Center Blog” (remnants of which still exists at millerwritingcenter.blogspot.com). They agreed on a structure with long-form content (fitting the interests of the committee members) to be distributed via social media on Twitter and Facebook (Instagram and Pinterest were considered and dismissed). The committee crafted a short and concise style guide and built a schedule for production and distribution. Gabby’s first post, “What Can Miley Cyrus’ VMA Performance Teach Us About Comma Rules?” (Figure 1) went up very shortly after the notorious 2013 performance, and her second, “Bill Nye on Dancing with the Stars, Sea Otters, Etc.” (Figure 2) went up shortly afterwards.

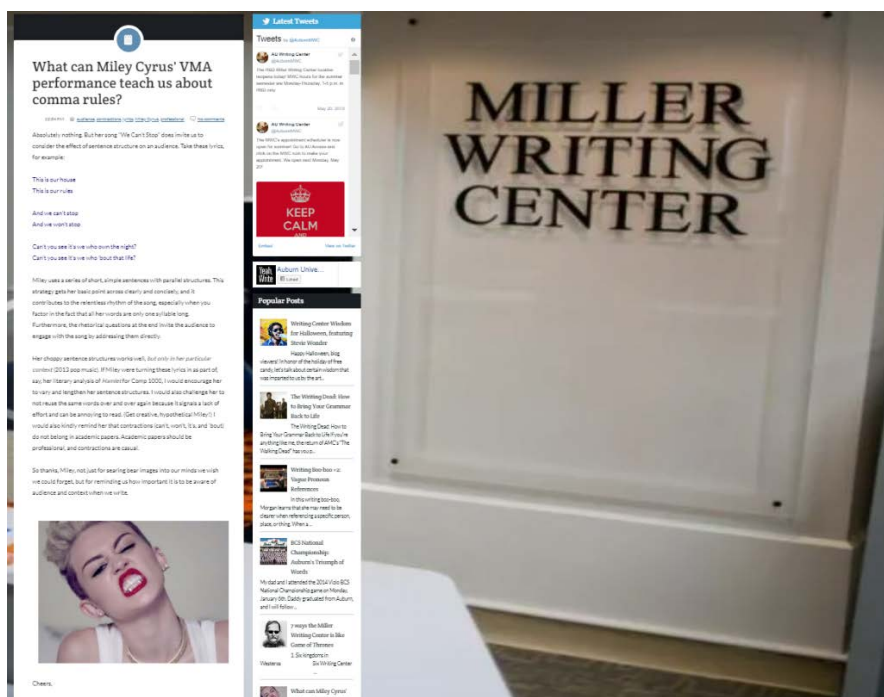


Figure 1. Screenshot from millerwritingcenter.blogspot.com/2013/09/what-can-miley-cyrus-vma-performance.html.

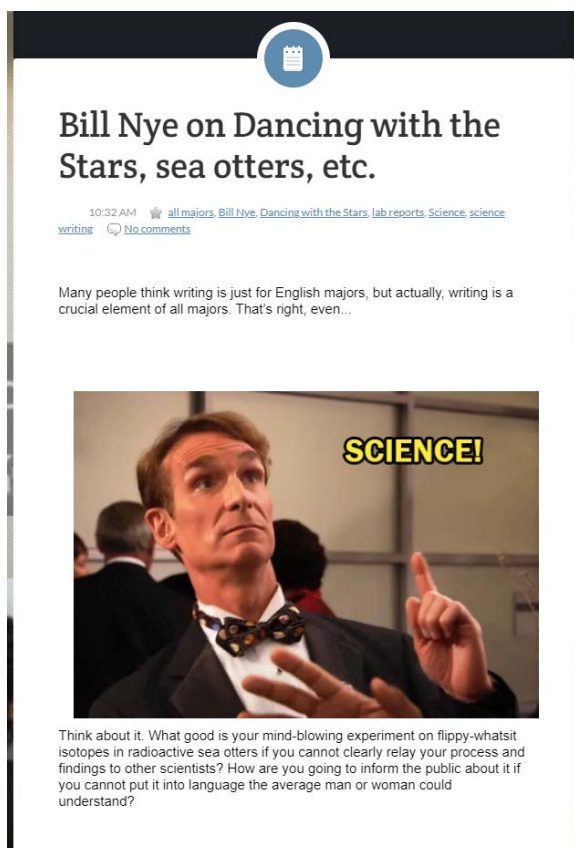


Figure 2. Screenshot from millerwritingcenter.blogspot.com/2013/09/bill-nye-on-dancing-with-stars-sea.html.

The first post addressed sentence-level writing concerns with a demystifying approach, while the second explicitly invited STEM majors to see writing as important and to use the writing center. Both using current and comic cultural references to create an approachable image, setting a clear model for the tutors creating future content.

Finally, Gabby and her committee developed 1) a schedule for creation of content, 2) a system for giving feedback, and 3) a schedule for moving material toward publication on Blogspot and then shared on Twitter/Facebook. In consultation with the Director, Gabby built a system included at least two committee members “signing-off” on each piece of content before posting. On a practical level, the committee identified Google Docs as the method for sharing and responding to each other’s content.

Using committee minutes as a record allowed us to smoothly transition between Lead Consultants serving as committee chair, maintaining the core message as well as the practical elements of the system. The committee structure also allowed our program to adjust based on the interests and strengths of the tutors. Over time, the variety of posts expanded to include shorter-form “listicles” to be more inclusive of different styles and audiences, including Molly’s “The Writing Dead: How to Bring your Grammar Back to Life” (Figure 3) and Matthew’s “7 Ways the MWC is Like *Game of Thrones*” (Figure 4), under his *nom de plume* “Sir Henry Reginald Puffenstuff”, and posts about Auburn-specific issues, like Dianna’s post on the 2104 BCS championship game (Figure 5).



Figure 3. Screenshot from millerwritingcenter.blogspot.com/2014/02/the-writing-dead-how-to-bring-your.html.



Figure 4. Screenshot from millerwritingcenter.blogspot.com/2013/11/7-ways-miller-writing-center-is-like.html.

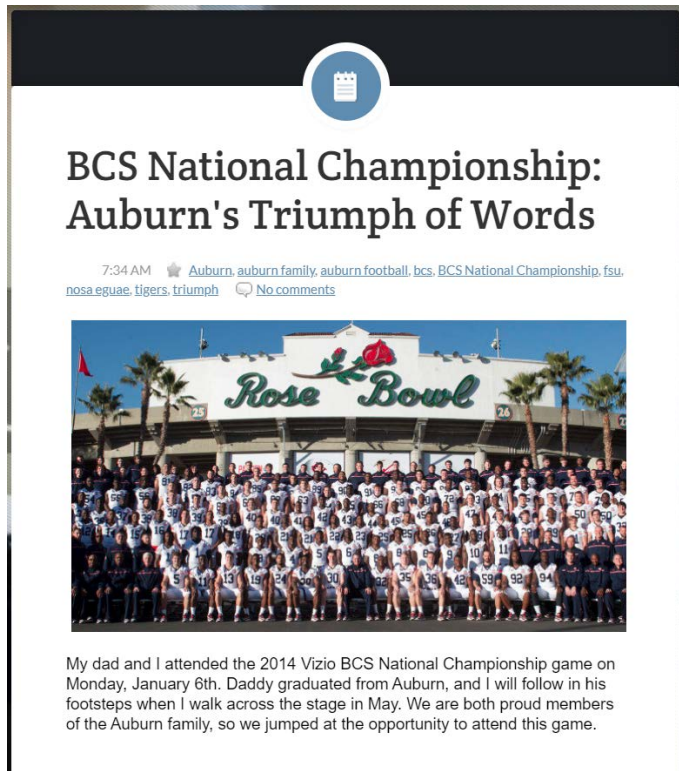


Figure 5. Screenshot from millerwritingcenter.blogspot.com/2014/01/bcs-national-championship-auburns.html.

These posts gave a human face to the MWC, as well concrete tips, signaling our core brand of working with writers, not just fixing writing. After a semester, Gabby handed the committee to Megan, who then handed it to Ashley, who launched the hashtag campaign #humansofMWC, and whose committee's short videos are still up on an unofficial MWC YouTube channel the committee set up. Ashley then handed the committee to Nick, who transitioned to more Instagram-friendly visual memes.

Outcomes

The blog exists now only as a ghost of its former self on Blogspot. We stopped maintaining the site in 2015 and migrated the content to the Office of University Writing webpage. But with changes in priorities, the blog has left that site, too. But the creative energy it produced, the conversations it stimulated, and the real-world administrative challenges it offered our staff, were well worth the effort. Moreover, this project had a practical outcome, in that the social media distribution system (on Facebook and Twitter) is still being used by the MWC and the OUW to promote events and highlight tutor success, adopted by the OUW's professional communications coordinator. While the decline of the blog is a melancholic outcome, the systems it produced persist. When one embarks on a social media project, it is good to remember the wisdom of Heraclitus; in social media, as in life, change is the only constant. Be ready to let go.

Why I Trusted the Tutors

With this committee system in place, I, as the director, was confident in handing over content creation to tutors, just as I was confident asking tutors to work with students. I had no need to closely monitor the Google Drive the tutors were using

(though I, of course, had access), because I was confident in the system the committee had built, and even more confident in the avenues of communication I had with my leadership team would insure any problems I needed to know about would make it to me. I read the minutes for the meetings, and I met regularly with the Lead Consultants to give feedback on how they were building their review and distribution system.

My faith was confirmed when one week I dropped into the Google Drive and saw a blog post that had not been published. When I opened it, I saw it was an elegantly crafted humorous analysis of the administrative structure of the Office of University Writing. It was funny, quirky, and pop-culture literate (as the style guide indicated), and it demystified the cross-disciplinary mission of the center in an accessible way. The author had taken the Corleone crime family from the *Godfather* movies and mapped the different characters onto different administrative elements of the Office of University Writing, which was very effective and explaining the diverse roles of the OUW in supporting faculty and students.

But it was clear in the notes from the peer reviewers (phrased thoughtfully), that while well-crafted, this post should not be shared; the staff recognized that the comparison was just a little too much for our office's brand. Miley Cyrus and *Game of Thrones* are edgy enough, but comparing your workplace to the mafia was a bit too far, and it was smart to shelve it. I was most impressed, particularly that their choices were thoughtful and measured, not anxious and defensive. They were engaging with the issue like the professional brand managers they were. The system worked.

Benefits for Tutors

I was very proud, both of the creativity of my consultants and of their

thoughtfulness and professionalism. When you let your tutors be the voice for your center, you'll be giving them significant real-world administrative and creative experience, the sort of concrete experience that can help create powerful personal statements and successful job interviews. Tutors can use tangible content to illustrate the authenticity and depth of their experience. To be able to speak thoughtfully about the process behind the production, selection, and distribution of a simple "Winter is Coming" meme to signal a busy time of the semester at the communication center can be powerful during a job search. But most importantly, you'll be helping your tutors grow as empowered thinkers and creators, just as they help other students become more empowered as communicators. This is why we trust our tutors with the individual intellectual growth of students from across the university, and why we can trust them with our center's social media.

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James C.W. Truman received his PhD in English from UNC-Chapel Hill in 2001. From 2013 to 2019 he was Assistant Director of University Writing at Auburn University, where he was responsible for running the Miller Writing Center. As part of a university-wide initiative, he worked with students and faculty across departments to enhance the culture of writing and writing instruction at the university. In 2019, he joined Trinity College (Hartford, CT) as a Visiting Assistant Professor of English and Writing.