



WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Vol. 11, No. 6 (February, 1978)

Last April, the WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER began as the newsletter for a group of about 60 people. Now, when we include this month's supplementary list of those who have joined us, our mailing list will have grown to about 200! We are not only a larger group than our charter members anticipated, we are also more diverse in terms of the services our labs provide--as evident in the articles included in this month's issue.

Please continue to send in your contributions for the newsletter, your donations of \$2 to help cover our rapidly increasing mailing costs (with checks made payable to me), and names of new members to:

Muriel Harris, editor
WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER
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The Instant Writing Workshop

The new Writing Workshop at the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science has no special room, no special staff, and no special equipment or materials. It was created by one faculty member--me--in response to increasingly frequent questions about writing problems from students and faculty at all levels of competence. A planned proposal for a formal writing laboratory had been shelved for lack of funds, but the questions continued, so I decided to see whether the service could generate its own funding by becoming a recognized--and indispensable--part of the College.

This semester, I have set aside four hours each week to answer questions "officially" in my office, using books and exercises I have accumulated over the years. To make this

"instant workshop" official, I first negotiated a course reduction in exchange for my tutoring time. This wasn't hard to do, because both my department director and the Dean of Faculty recognized a need for the service I would be providing. I then arranged to be interviewed by a reporter for the College newspaper, who wrote a front-page story about the workshop-to-be; I also wrote a note for the faculty newsletter to further publicize my so-far nonexistent service. Then, I designed and duplicated a faculty referral sheet, and put ten copies of it, and an explanatory covering letter, in each professor's mailbox.

All last term I went about drumming up business. I posted notices in prominent places, made announcements to my students, buttonholed other faculty members in the cafeteria. When asked to give a presentation on writing term papers in two biology classes, I recommended instead that small groups of students come to the workshop. I also offered to use workshop time to provide ongoing consultations to these students as they researched, wrote, and revised their papers. When a couple of faculty members expressed an interest in auditing my scientific writing course, I suggested that they see me during workshop hours. I also volunteered to meet regularly with recent graduates of our developmental English courses.

I have made it clear that I am ready and willing to help with everything from basic study skills to research papers to articles for publication to resumé's. This semester, I am open for business and eager to see whether the workshop will be well attended. If it is, my "instant workshop" may turn into a full-time service with staff, space, equipment, and a legitimate place in the College budget.

Laurie Kirszner
Philadelphia College of
Pharmacy and Science

The Autotutor System, mentioned on page 2, Vol. I, No. 1 (April, 1977) issue of the WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER, incorporates an individual viewing console into which a 35 mm film-strip cassette is loaded. At the top of each "frame" as it is projected on the view-screen, a point is made concerning the concept being studied, and below that two or three examples are given. Then, on the same frame, a question is posed for the student (e.g., "Which of the following sentences is correctly punctuated?"). The student reads this material at his or her own speed, and then selects an answer by pushing a button labeled "A" through "D"--at this point the "branching" system comes into play. If the response is

correct, the program proceeds to the next concept or example; if, however, the response is incorrect, the machine "branches" off to a frame which explains the error, provides additional correct examples, and then returns to the original frame for the student to reanswer the original question. These machines are relatively expensive, \$1100 per console, and approximate \$50 per cassette; but they do offer some very good, comprehensive spelling, grammar, and punctuation lessons which require little teacher time with fairly well motivated students. These machines are manufactured by Sargent-Welch Scientific Co., 7300 N. Linder Ave., Skokie, Illinois 60076.

Donald Ryan
Kansas City Kansas
Community College

The Editor's Mailbag...

I have thoroughly enjoyed reading the newsletter, particularly to discover just how many labs there currently are. I noted in the December issue of College Composition and Communication the organization of the National Association for Remedial Developmental Studies in Post-Secondary Education (though the title does seem a bit cumbersome). I am gratified to see that those of us with interests in this aspect of teaching are not only getting together and communicating but also that our special skills are being recognized.

In that same issue of CCC I read with interest Muriel Harris's article about the writing lab as a resource center for faculty. One of the most rewarding offshoots of our establishing a writing lab at Waubensee College was how much we teachers involved shared of our methods and philosophies during our organizational meetings. Of a department of nine, four were involved in the project, and a couple of us differed sharply in our views toward teaching writing--or so we thought. Once we started communicating, however, we realized how illusionary many of our differences were, how many were based on faulty inferences. By the time we were through talking, arguing (and on some days even shouting), all of us had a greater appreciation of and respect for not only each other as teachers but also the entire process of teaching writing. With that start we continued to exchange views and information, and as a result we saw our teaching effectiveness improve.

Jim Kolsky
Grossmont College
San Diego City
Evening College

I am quite interested in writing labs and would love to join in on the exchange of experience.

Presently I am employed as a Learning Skill Instructor at the University of Winnipeg, a small Liberal Arts & Sciences college. I just recently completed my Master's degree and the title of my research paper was "Individualizing Freshman Composition Programs." In my past I enthusiastically support writing laboratories as the best way to teach composition.

Christine D. Horn
Student Counselling Services
University of Winnipeg

We are working on a laboratory course in basic writing with Mary Epes and would be interested in learning more about others working at this level.

Carolyn Kirkpatrick, Dept. of English
York College-CUNY
Jamaica, NY 11451

I will be directing a Writing Center next year and want to keep in touch with current ideas and concerns of writing lab personnel. This semester I will be finishing my dissertation on the revision strategies of ten student writers and ten professional writers. The data I collected concerning students' attitudes towards revision, rewriting, and editing might be of some interest for your newsletter as it challenges many of the assumptions implicit in various teaching methods and models. I will write a part of the research into a short informal piece for your newsletter.

Nancy Sommers
Boston University

Using this approach in remedial writing courses, I have found that 40 to 50 percent can achieve the needed competencies in a fall quarter. They later succeed in the first quarter of English composition (the course for which they are being remediated) with 89 percent of them succeeding at the C level or better. However, the success rate decreases in the next quarter of English composition (72 percent) and plummets in the third (31 percent). The dropout rate is proportionately higher each successive quarter, too.

For those who did not succeed during the first quarter, the prevailing factors working against their fellows are even stronger, and success is likely then during the first quarter. Sometimes they cannot succeed in three quarters.

It's still the best system I know, but it does not work as well in isolation as it has the potential for.

Louise Clara
Division of Special Studies
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The Writing Lab at
Brigham Young University

The writing lab at BYU is part of the Learning Services Center, housed in the library, and offering assistance in math, reading, writing, effective study, and communications skills. Over 1000 students use the services of the Center daily.

The writing lab is an integral part of the General Education program.

All freshmen students at BYU are required to pass a proficiency test in basic writing skills in order to meet the General Education requirement in composition. The test, which we call an "evaluation," consists of a 70-item objective test and two essays (written in a three-hour period, on contrasting topics). The objective test attempts to measure proficiency in grammar, mechanics and basic rhetorical principles. We are in the process of developing equivalent forms of this test, and refining it in other ways.

A similar measure of writing proficiency exists at the junior level. Again, students

take an objective test; and they submit three short papers, plus a library research paper, as evidence of actual writing skill.

The principal function of the writing lab is to help students acquire the skills they need to pass these evaluations. About 125 students each semester use the lab service exclusively as preparation. Students enrolled in other writing classes come to the lab for special assistance. We are trying to determine if the lab can be a more efficient preparation than traditional classroom instruction at least a better option for certain kinds of students. However, the English Department is quite strongly committed to traditional classroom instruction.

Salaries for writing tutors are paid by the English Department. Support (facility, secretarial help, supplies, etc.) is paid by the General College.

In time, we plan to offer writing assistance to all students at the university, whatever their needs. At present, we have special sections for honor students, Philosophy 105 (Evaluating Arguments and Evidence) students, ESL students, journalism students, and for graduate students in recreation.

Instructional materials consist of the usual laboratory kinds of materials--carefully selected in as great a variety as practicable. Two or three tutors are available always for individual assistance. We also have scheduled about a dozen small-group, lecture-discussion sessions weekly in a small room in the lab (up to 20 students). Topics are announced in advance: thesis, organization, paragraphing, grammar, mechanics, etc.

Undergraduate students, certifying in English education, render invaluable service through internships arranged by the English education faculty. The other four tutors are graduate students or part-time faculty.

Our main aim is to attract students who either need special help or who are willing and able to take the initiative to learn writing skills in the flexible lab-type setting.

Don Norton
Brigham Young University



I might describe some of our programs at Kansas City Kansas Community College as a partial response to the questions mentioned in Vol. I, no. 3, the June 1977 issue of the WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER. We offer four basic credit courses in our lab, and are currently developing mini-courses, for credit, to supplement these.

Our Basic Skills course offers remedial help in both reading and writing. We use the EDL Controlled Readers, one per student, to help students read at their own grade levels and check their comprehension of the material they have read, prior to writing about those materials. One composition instructor teaches each section, which is limited to a maximum of fifteen students. With the reading machines, the autotutors, and various audio cassette programs as aids, this instructor can work individually with each student on specific writing problems. We often require this course of students who display reading weaknesses on a 7-minute screening test administered to all incoming freshmen, or of students who show writing problems in their first few Composition I efforts. The course carries 2 credit hours toward graduation, and is graded simply P/NC. Criteria for credit include elimination of major grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors, and a demonstration of reading abilities adequate to college-level texts.

Our Study Skills course, which is still in the experimental stage, offers help to the average student who needs instruction in developmental writing skills, notetaking from lectures and texts, outlining, test taking, and textbook surveying and vocabulary developmental writing skills, notetaking from lectures and texts, outlining test taking, and textbook surveying and vocabulary development (both general and specialized). This course is our attempt at expanding the services of the lab beyond the needs of only the English Department. We received a State Department of Education Grant for our pilot program in Nursing, and it proved promising enough that we received a three year grant for the expansion of the course. The Nursing Department gives us at least some of the credit for reducing their attrition rate from 10 to 15% three years ago to only 2 to 3% this past semester. This course, too, offers 2 hours of credit toward graduation, and is graded P/NC.

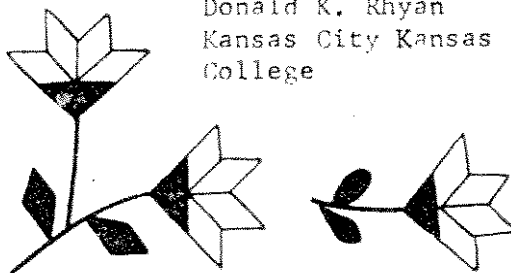
We also offer a Spelling course for 1 hour credit, and a Math course for 1 hour credit (both P/NC). The Math course is simply a basic review of Whole Numbers, Fractions, Dec-

imals, Percentages, and Ratio and Proportion on the Autotutor system; little or no teacher time is involved. We are also working out mini-courses in grammar, punctuation, notetaking, vocabulary development, etc.

We are still a part of the English Department, and some of our funding comes from that budget; and our grant obviously adds to our resources. However, the fact that we can offer credit for, and hence charge tuition for, our courses is an option that we consider worthy of consideration by other writing labs

Certainly, it may be stretching a point to grant college credit for the development of skills prerequisite to regular college work; on the other hand, we limit the credit hours applicable to graduation, we do not allow our courses to satisfy any requirement in Composition, Literature, or elsewhere, and we can argue to the administration that our programs are to some extent self-supporting.

Donald K. Rhyan
Kansas City Kansas Community
College



INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION:
A RESPONSE TO ERROL ERICKSON'S ARTICLE
IN THE DECEMBER, 1977 ISSUE OF THE WLN

The Mastery Learning concept is especially well-suited to an individualized lab program. The approach must be employed in its entirety, however, which presupposes competency-based instruction. If one can identify what constitutes mastery learning (what competencies are required for success at the next level), design diagnostic procedures to determine where a beginning can be made, and provide materials that allow self-pacing and alternative modes of learning, the concept is workable.

The success rate is satisfactory, but variables enter into it, such as the necessity for expert counseling and career guidance, financial aid, and personal contacts to keep the student in school. The reinforcement of successful achievement is there in your program, but the system itself must be in tune to achieve Blooms's percentages.

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