WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing

....from the editor....

It may be coincidence, but recently I've heard several writing lab directors voicing a similar concern. On one hand, writing labs are generally administered by energetic, dedicated people who seek out new services their labs can offer. (Besides, given the paranoia most directors feel, it's always a good idea to have labs become as indispensable as possible.) As a result, new services, new responsibilities, new pro-grams get added in to all the existing programs and projects.

The other side of this coin, however, is less appealing. The more we do, the more we're expected to do. And an added problem, noted one lab director, is that we can become so involved with so many responsibilities that we can lose sight of our primary goal, offering one-to-one tutoring.

Another lab director notes that she is doing too much but that "too much" has become her "normal responsibilities." Yet retrenchment is a backwards motion, and standing still can be a form of stagnation.

Do you share these concerns? Any comments or suggestions?

Muriel Harris, editor

Writing center workshops for high risk students

Students entering college, particularly the so-called "high risk" students, are at risk precisely because failure in even one vital area may mean losing the chance to stay in college at all, In most colleges, the student most likely to survive is able to perform at a minimal level of competence in mathematics, in writing essay-exam answers, or in thinking independently and critically- to name just three areas. At the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater writing center, which is one component of a developmental studies program, the staff has established non-credit work-shops to help students lower their risk of failure in such vital areas as math and essay exams. The workshops are designed to help students succeed where they have not succeeded before, either because more traditional avenues have not provided them success or because they simply have not yet developed procedures of thinking and writing that their college teachers take for granted.

Each of the three workshops described below focuses on a skill in which failure can become sufficient cause to jeopardize a college career. The workshop that uses writing to solve math word problems addresses the needs of the student who always has found math difficult, is anxious when asked to think in terms of numerical symbols, but is otherwise an average or above-average student when allowed to operate in the realm of natural language. In the work-shop entitled "Critical Thinking," the target clientele are all those undergraduates who are either afraid or unable to express their own views; instructors may have asked these students to state their own opinions but then have reacted negatively when the students failed to provide logical support and evidence for the opinions. The workshop on essay exams is the most popular, probably because so many undergraduates, not just first-semester fresh-men, have had insufficient experience with writing effective essay answers: no matter who attends, however, the workshop leader focuses on study and preparation techniques that so often seem lacking among typical entry-level and high risk students. All of the non-credit sessions are called "workshops" if only to stress that the students need to participate, share with peers the problems that they bring with them, and get right down to working on these problems by using the techniques introduced and modeled during the workshop.

Solving Mom Word Problems

Emotional or social problems that any one of us might experience often get "solved" sooner when we write about them in order to gain insights, to discover options, to impose order upon confusion. Yet many of the teachers and students who are aware of this therapeutic technique for dealing with personal difficulties are unlikely to think of writing as a means to solve math word problems. At the writing center, some students, especially those who experience math anxiety, seem to benefit from writing about the math word problems that confuse and frustrate them.

A two-session workshop focuses on reading and writing techniques for solving word problems typically assigned in pre-algebra and algebra courses. The workshop is scheduled at the same time that students are working on word problems in their classes. Model problems with which to introduce and practice the tech-

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niques are chosen in close consultation with math instructors, and at least one math instructor attends each session as a resource person.

During the first session, emphasis is placed on a reading strategy that can then become one model for writing down in words the relationship described in the problem. To find the relationship, the students first ask, 'What is involved here'?" They circle the verbs and write them down. Then, in their own words, the students express the relationship that exists between the nouns and verbs. Finally, they substitute mathematical symbols for the words to form an equation and to find the solution. Let us take as an example the following problem:

> Chris spends 3 times as much time studying for English as she does for math, and twice as much time studying for history as she does for English. If she spends a total of 24 hours studying for all 3 subjects, how much time does she study for history?

The students underline "times." "English," "math," "tine," "history," "English," "total," "24 hours," "subjects," "time," "history"; and they circle "spends," "studying," "studying," "spends," "studying," "spends." Then, combining nouns and verbs that are related, they

might write:

-- studying subjects will involve spending
- studying English, math and history
will add up to an amount of time
-- studying English + studying math +
studying history = 24 hours

The students then plug appropriate math symbols into the last word equation above.

Once the students have seen the above strategy modeled and have tried it out, they are encouraged to experiment with other writing approaches as well. One approach is to write information as someone reads a problem aloud. Another is free-form writing- thinking about a problem out loud and writing down the thought at the same time, as in the following example:

After a 20% reduction, an item is on sale for $9600. What was the original price of the item?

This problem talks about getting an item at the store at a reduced price. Since the item is on sale, the original price must have been more than it is now. So it must have been more than $9600. Whatever it was (X) was reduced 20%. So if I think of the original price as a full 1am% of what the price could be, the sale price must be 80% of the original price (x)-- that is, .80X = 9600.

During the second session, the students write about the problems they have brought, share with each other what they have written, and verbalize what they feel they have done to help clarify their thinking processes. The workshop instructors emphasize that writing may be most useful when students are learning how to solve new kinds of word problems, are stuck on any particular problem, or are overly anxious during a test and need a technique to calm them.

Critical Thinking

In the critical thinking workshops, the students learn a four-step model for thinking and writing about complex moral and social issues typical to history, political science, philosophy, English and education. The students are encouraged to bring with them writing

assignments and test questions from the courses that they are taking, but they first practice the critical thinking model with editorials from the student newspaper and feature columns from "My Turn" in Newsweek. The students start with texts they have not written because 1) in their courses, they usually are expected to react "critically" to discourse they may feel is authoritative, and 2) they often find it difficult to identify precisely another author's basic premise or thesis.

In the workshop, the first of four steps is to find the thesis of a given discourse, spoken or written. The students write summaries based on answers to such questions as "What is the issue being argued? What is the writer's position on this issue, that is, what does he or she want us to believe or do? What are the main arguments for this position?" The second step is to write down antitheses- other possible beliefs, answers, solutions, options, or "cons" for the original author's "pro." In each instance, the students list as many alternatives as they can think of to put up against the author's position.

The third step is to evaluate evidence. Before the students write down any sentences, however, they make mind maps by attaching as many pros and cons as they can think of to each antithesis and the thesis. These pros and cons are not to be based on merely the facts, details, and examples in the original text; instead, the students must determine the possible motives of the author and must bring in and apply, whenever possible, their own prior knowledge of the subject. For instance, if they read a statement by teachers advocating a policy of no makeup exams with arguments presenting only the advantages for students, students at the workshops usually point out that the teachers' motives may include the desire to avoid extra work. Once mind maps are completed, the students evaluate all the options by writing in one or more paragraphs about the pros and cons in their mind maps; when they read these paragraphs aloud to each other, they are told to listen for "scaffolding," that is, the kind of explanatory or transitional language which makes clear what the writer is talking about: "one good reason for the author's proposal is ... a disadvantage could be ..."

The fourth and final thinking step is to make a critical judgment, to defend the original thesis or one of the antitheses or to make a new

synthesis based on the evaluation of ideas in step three. Many students can be led to a conclusion that is their own synthesis of ideas if enough disagreement exists in the group to generate discussion and debate. Whatever the case, at this stage in the workshop, the focus moves to the importance of a thinker supporting any conclusion that he or she comes to.

Indeed, how to get to and build upon the conclusion in this four-part process is really the basis for generating a written text that becomes the student's own. A typical problem students have with course assignments and tests is that they are asked to give their own opinions, but they either cannot identify opinions of their own or cannot defend them adequately. The point of the workshop is that the students must go through the steps they practice there before they can begin to outline or write a draft of critical analysis based on their own thinking. And the process is essentially the same whether they start with analysis of one discourse as in literature classes or with many sources as in a history research project.

The final task of the workshop, then, is for students and instructors to consult with each other about how to tackle existing assignments, take-home test questions, and potential essay-exam questions that the students try to predict themselves. Even if the students do not write out in paragraphs the first three thinking steps outlined above, they do make mind maps which will facilitate their thinking and writing for step four. What we hope they have learned is that step four becomes their own thesis which they now can defend with support and arguments based on their own critical thinking.

Essay Exams

A one-session workshop about taking essay exams has a flexible format ready to be adjusted to the number of students attending and to the needs they bring with them. What is not flexible is that equal time, if not more time, is given to preparation for essay exams rather than strewing just the action of w r i a n essay answer during the exam. And the thinking and writing that the students do during the workshop centers on pre-writing, pre-performance, rehearsal activities.

One of the most successful and popular activities, usually a new idea for everyone who attends, is the process of making a mind map of

concepts covered in a course. Before the session begins, the students must supply- as the price of admission, so to speak- questions that they want answered about preparing for and taking essay exams, Invariably, some of the questions are about how or what to study. When the instructor's first answer is to make a list of potential questions on main issues and to practice writing out answers, the inevitable response is. "But how do you predict the right questions?" At this point, the instructor introduces the idea of using a mind map of the course material to predict questions. Since few students are familiar with the technique, each group first needs to learn what a mind map is. The instructor models making a mind map, usually of concepts covered in a lecture course such as history. After watching the instructor combine elements of the map into typical exam questions, the students play teacher, invent questions of their own, submit them anonymously, and as a group discuss and evaluate those they write down on the chalk board.

The next step, of course, is for the students to make mind maps of their own based on classes they are taking. Usually pairing or grouping works well here: people can ask each other for advice about their maps and, most importantly, two or several people can work on making questions from a single map. This is the turning point during a typical workshop. Most students say that making mind maps in order to predict test questions is not something they have thought of or heard of doing before, and their new feeling of being in control, of knowing a way to impose order upon what had seemed a hopelessly large mass of unmanageable material, makes them receptive to additional injunctions, ideas, advice.

In whatever time remains, instructor and students are able to talk about writing out practice answers during timed rehearsals, stating the essay's thesis in a clear single sentence, providing sufficient support, examples, and so forth- all in the context of a new tool that makes these other things easier to do. Students now see that if they have a map and questions based on key ideas, they can proceed systematically to search out data for answering the questions; in other words, they have a way to study for the exam. And the emphasis on organization in using this mind-map system can make effective organization during the exam more possible: it is one thing to say, "Be organized!" but another to show how to become

organized in one's thinking before the hour of performance.

Conclusion

We writing teachers talk nowadays, almost without thinking about It anymore, of writing as a process. How often do we think or talk about writing as being part of the process of doing something else? Among not just entry level or high risk college students, but also among most other groups of people, writing or the process of writing is not an end but a means. In the workshops described above, the primary goals of the participants are not per se to write. Even the student preparing for an essay exam is not thinking first of writing but rather of learning something and passing the exam. To survive in college, students need to think critically and to pass math courses and essay exams. Non-credit workshops that depend on processes of writing can make a difference in these areas for many entry-level and high risk students.

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Developing a writing center identity

Last year, when I began my present position as Director of Writing Programs at a small, four-year, liberal arts college, one of my tasks was to develop, staff, and direct a writing center. Previously, writing tutoring had taken place in a corner of the library; for many reasons, both the library staff and the English Department wanted a separate location for the Writing Center. We decided upon the two front rooms of a house which the college had recently acquired, and I was pleased with the choice. Our main tutoring room, which had been the living room, is wood-paneled and homey. We have our own front entrance, off of a large wrap-around porch. The location of the house was ideal, too, being right across the street from the building which houses the English Department and just down the block from the library. A couple of weeks after the fall term began, we were open and ready for business.

As any writing center director will attest, there are many problems with establishing a writing center. One of my concerns, and the

focus of this discussion, was to promote our services, to establish a way of getting students voluntarily to seek tutoring. Since a separate place for writing tutoring was a "new" idea on my campus, I felt that, in addition to talking about how tutoring could help students, I needed to establish our Writing Center as a
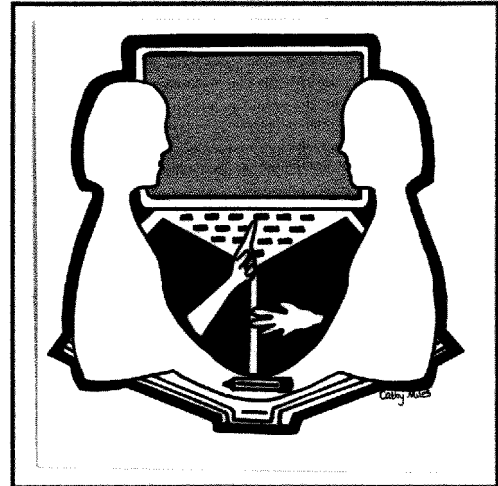
"special place." In other words. we needed our own identity. I decided that we needed our own logo. And I wanted this project to be a student-oriented one-to involve as many students as possible so the writing center would he their place.

I thought about having a campus-wide contest, but since our school is small (1200 undergraduates) and since I wanted to establish our identity as the Writing Center as quickly as possible, I opted to go through our Art Department. I sought advice from the chair of the Art Department and, fortunately, he was currently teaching a course in commercial design and was most cooperative in working my idea into his course syllabus. He suggested that I be the "client" for his students so that he could use the assignment as a learning experience in presenting a design concept in a business-related environment.

First, we set up a conference where the commercial design students met with me in the Writing Center and I explained to them the goals and philosophy of the Writing Center, They asked questions about my expected product. I really didn't have any preconceived notions about the logo, except that it reinforce the idea of face-to-face communication between people about the writing process, and I wanted the various ways of writing and communication reflected in the logo. We established deadlines,

both for their class assignment and for my receiving the finished product.

I was pleased with the professional way in which the commercial design students handled the assignment. Several stopped by my office with their preliminary sketches and ideas, which gave us a chance to talk about the function of the Writing Center. On the day when they made their formal presentations to me, the client, we again met in the Writing Center. I had asked that the person in charge of our campus publications attend in order to offer advice on the technical aspects of their designs. Our publications director knew, for example, if screens were properly used and if the design would reproduce well. The students, appropriately attired for this professional consultation in suits or dresses, presented their designs and talked about how they represented the communications concept that I had wanted.

After consulting with the publications director and the chair of the English Department, I choose the design that serves our logo. It shows the outline of two people talking superimposed upon an open book. A pen is close at hand, and since we had just begun to use word processing in our composition courses and had a computer available in the Writing Center, a computer screen and keyboard comprise the background.

I plan on using our logo in several ways in order to establish an identity for our new Writing Center. The logo, as well as the Writing Center telephone number, is on bookmarks which we give to each student during freshman orientation; these bookmarks will also be made available to the student body at-large. I am having a sign, which will feature the logo, painted for our front door. I am toying with the idea of having the logo screen-printed on t-shirts or large buttons for the tutors. In addition, our campus newspaper will run an article about the contest, focusing on the student who designed the logo, as well as giving information about the Writing Center. In this way, the logo "contest" becomes a way of publicizing the Writing Center. The student who designed the logo also has benefited from the assignment. She received a cash award plus a congratulatory letter from me as Director of Writing Pro-grams to place in her portfolio.

I am very pleased with the way the experience evolved because I received coopera-

tion from our publications director, our Art Department, and our English Department. In addition, I feel that the logo is truly a student effort, which reinforces the purpose of the writing center; to serve as a place where students can come together with other students (we rely solely on peer tutors) to talk about their writing process. The logo is a step towards establishing our identity on campus and, eventually, our community.

> JoAnna Stephens Mink
> Atlantic Christian College
> Wilson, NC

NOTE OF CORRECTION

In the December 1988 issue of the Writing Lab Newsletter, the article entitled "A Secondary School Success Story for Writing Enthusiasts" should have listed Penny Frankel as the co-author with Kay Severns. Penny's name was inadvertently omitted. It would be nice to blame the computer, but it was really just a dumb human mistake. Apologies to Penny Frankel!

Letter to the editor

How wonderful the newsletter looks since you started using a desktop publishing system. I am sure that other readers would be interested to know what you are using to pro-duce it; you may want to share this information with all of us.
-- Evelyn Posey, Director of the Liberal
        Arts Computer Lab
University of Texas at El Paso

Editor's response: I don't know how many of us are enmeshed in desktop publishing, but if you're interested, I offer the following. I use a Macintosh SE with a 20 MB hard disk. Word as the word processing software, Page Maker for page layout, and a LaserWriter Plus printer. That's about the extent of my expertise on the subject as I am collecting shelves of books on page layout, graphic design, visual presentation, type fonts, and other such crucial topics that make it all work. Can anyone recommend a good basic book on graphic design for those of us who are visually uninitiated?
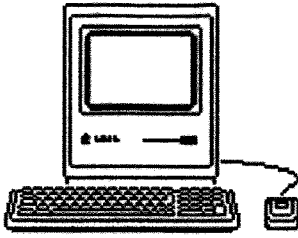
Micro Style   by Evelyn Posey

Which One Should I Buy?

As more wilting center directors discover the value of adding computers to their centers, they will begin the process of shopping for personal computers. You may be one of those who has already begun looking. Consequently, you are aware of how confusing this process can be. Apple, IBM, IBM compatible, Tandy, Commodore- the big question is, " Which one should I buy?"

Choosing one computer over another is similar to purchasing a car. Several may interest you and fulfill your basic requirements, but you finally select one that has the unique features that appeal to you most. When purchasing a computer, rather than ask which one to buy, begin by asking yourself, "What do I want to do with the computers I purchase for the writing center?" Once you determine your specific needs, selecting a computer will be much easier.

Initially, you probably want computers for word processing; this will allow students to generate ideas, draft, revise, and print, Almost any personal computer will do this. If this is your primary reason for purchasing a computer, then purchase the brand of computer that is already most prevalent on your campus, The students who come to your center may be familiar with the equipment and, as a result, will find it easier to begin using the hardware immediately. When we opened the Study Skills and Tutorial Services Microcomputer Learning Lab at UT El Paso four years ago, we checked with the various colleges on campus to determine which computers were already in use. Although we found almost every brand represented, we also discovered that most departments had either IBM PC or Apple Ile computers, As a result, we purchased some of each for our center.

It is possible, though, that you may want to use computers for more than just word

processing. If, for instance, you wish to keep your center's program records on computer, to offer tutoring, or to create fliers, brochures, or newsletters, you will find that some computers are better suited to these specific applications.

From my experience with computers, I have discovered (and I'm sure that there are those who will disagree with me, particularly competing computer manufacturers) that the IBM PC or IBM PC compatible is best suited for the business software required to keep records. The greatest selection of database, spreadsheet, and other business-related software is available for these computers.

If your center provides tutoring for many disciplines, you may be interested in computer-assisted instruction software that allows you to use the computer as an additional tutor. If this is your greatest need, the Apple computer may be your best choice. Since Apples are so widely used in the public schools, you will find the greatest number of tutorial packages es are written for the Apple,

If, though, you wish to do page layout for a newsletter or other documents that require unusual column widths, type sizes, or graphics, you will want to consider the Macintosh family of computers. At this time the Mac allows you to use these programs with greatest ease.

Occasionally, your needs, budget, and personality point to one computer. If so, you're lucky. More often, you have to narrow the choices through a process of elimination. More-over, most of you want a computer that will do all of the applications described above. Consequently, you will be forced to purchase a "corn-promise computer." You must decide which of the applications, other than word processing, you will be doing most often and purchase the computer that most closely meets those needs.

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In addition, consider the following buying tips when looking at computers. Buy what is available and being used now; don't listen to the dealer's promises for the future. The industry is notorious for its "vaporware" (products that are announced, but that never appear). Also, don't take a dealer's word that a certain computer is just what you want. Try it yourself or ask other people in your field for recommendations and purchase one of these proven products.

Once you decide which brand of computer to purchase, you must decide on a particular model. This often depends on how much you are able to spend, rather than on what you would like to have. Start conservatively; scout around for a few software programs that you know you would like to use or that you have heard recommended, and purchase the least expensive model of the computer brand that runs these desired programs. If you purchase a computer that can be expanded (as most can) to include more memory, additional drives, etc., you can always add these features as you discover a need for them.

At this point, you may be feeling a bit overwhelmed with all that you must consider, but you are almost done. All that is left is to select the peripherals-the hardware added to the computer to give you a complete system. The only additional hardware you really need is a keyboard, disk drives, monitor, and printer.

When selecting a monitor, determine whether the computers will be used more for word processing or for tutorial packages. Tutorial programs look wonderful in color, but text generated on a color monitor is difficult to read, unless you can afford a very expensive, high-quality monitor.

When selecting printers, think about how you would like the finished product to look on the page. Undergraduate students who use computers to write are not too choosy, so dot matrix printers will usually suffice for their needs. You and graduate students working on theses or other such projects may prefer a letter quality or laser jet printer. If you are responsible for designing layout for brochures, fliers, or newsletters, you may want a top quality postscript printer that produces a page similar to what you would get if you sent your work to a print shop.

There are admittedly many decisions to make, but if at all possible, think of buying computers as an educational process, rather than an exasperating one. Start slowly, talk to colleagues who use them, and don't worry if you can't operate the family VCR- I can't either.

In the next few articles, I'll share some suggestions for purchasing software, including the names of some programs that we find particularly useful in the UT El Paso computer writing centers.

For your bookshelf

Questions, Questioning Techniques and Effective Teaching. Ed. William W. Wile Washington U.C.: National Education Association, 1987; soft cover, 200 pp. , 814.95.

Question-asking, a major tool of tutoring, is the focus of this collection of essays which can be a useful source of readings for tutor training programs. Various chapters discuss the beneficial (and detrimental) effects of questions; pedagogical differences in asking questions before, during, and after instruction; types of questions that are most effective; optimal wait time after asking questions; ways to respond to questions; discussion strategies; and techniques to facilitate student questions.

The book's intended audience is the classroom teacher, but there is much that applies to tutorial dialogue as well, and the pages of references after each chapter are good sources for further reading. In sum, this book should serve as a valuable addition for your resource shelf of readings for your tutors, and for those writing labs which serve as teacher resource centers too, you might also want a second copy for classroom teachers. Orders should be addressed to: NEA Professional Library, P.O. Box 509, West Haven, CT 06516 (phone: 203-934-2669).

Tutors' Column

The fruits of tutoring

As a tutor in the Writing Lab at the University of Tennessee at Martin, I work with students on both a one-to-one and small group basis. I talk with students who are writing on a wide variety of topics. From a book review of Canidide to an essay about cockroaches, from a description of cold beer to an analysis of a "hot" political issue, I become absorbed in helping students find a way, or a better way, to express themselves.

Most students come to the English Writing Lab to work on specific compositions, but some also come as a small group with a common concern, such as "What is the hidden meaning in "Rappaccini's Daughter'?" This particular topic brought out some interesting comments from some students who, with a little direction, were able to discuss several interesting and imaginative approaches to analyzing Hawthorn's short story. In our writing lab, the lab assistant or tutor must be prepared to talk, to guide, to accept, and to teach. We must be prepared to deal with questions on grammar or with questions about revising an entire composition. The needs of each student writer deter-mine the flow of the tutoring session.

I deal with a variety of students who are working on a variety of assignments. I may talk with one student about an original short story or poem and, a few minutes later, I may discuss with another student the specifics of a psychology laboratory report or a business case study. I usually begin a tutoring session with talk-brainstorming or "rapping" (without the beat) is a good way to begin. Taking this approach seems to help the student relax and ease into a positive attitude which encourages learning. In our talk about the assignment, the topic, and possible approaches to successful completion of the task at hand, the student is motivated to express his own idea, take notes, and write creatively using and practicing correct gram-mar, rhetoric, and logic.

As a tutor, I suggest materials for students to read. Our lab has an extensive collec-tion of workbooks, handbooks, dictionaries, literature books, and other materials readily available for students' use. I find that I can often help a student by referring that student to additional source material. We keep a current selection of magazines and newspapers on hand for use. In addition to our "standard" books and reference materials, lab staff and invited workshop speakers have developed handouts on a variety of topics. Writing workshops are offered at a specified time each week; computer workshops are offered four days each week.

Since our lab is an "open" lab, we deal with students from throughout the university-we record more than 1,500 student visits each quarter. To these students we do not offer a "quick fix" or a simple miracle. We do, however, offer them a place where they can come for individualized help, encouragement, under-standing, and explanation. We try to tutor and teach so that each student gains more confidence in his/her ability as a writer.

As a Writing Lab tutor. I am challenged by problems other than poor writing skills. I have had two deaf pupils who used the lab facilities. One uses signs and reads lips; the other understands only the written word. There is another student whose physical handicap is the inability to speak. These additional challenges take time, but the compensations are commensurate with the effort.

Because of the professional yet relaxed atmosphere provided, the Writing Lab has become an integral part of the teaching community at UTM. Faculty members enthusiastically endorse the program and take advantage of the facility often by referring their students who have writing problems. The Lab, however, is certainly not considered a depot for below-average students; it is a highly respected and integral part of the university community, having earned our reputation through much hard work.

Someone once wisely said, "Teaching is a

gift you give to others." I certainly agree. Teaching at any level can be a tiresome task at times, but the excitement that comes from seeing a learner's eyes sparkle with understanding makes all the exhaustion worthwhile. The long struggle endured by tutor and student is compensated.

One point needs to be made clear: the lab tutors in no way take the place of the class-room teachers. However, they can work on a one-to-one basis (a luxury not generally afforded classroom teachers), and they can work on problems specific to the individual student writer. The results can make for a happier situation in the regular classroom.

What better fruits does any tutor (teacher) hope to produce?

Marcia M. Lavely Writing
Lab Assistant
University of Tennessee at Martin

10th Annual Summer Institute for Developmental and Learning Assistance Professionals

July 1-28,1989

Appalachian State University Boone, NC

The Kellogg Institute for the Training and Certification of Developmental Educators is accepting applications for its summer institute. Institute fees are $650, plus $340 for room and board; some scholarships are available. Application deadline: April 1, 1989. Applications and further information can be obtained from Elaini Bingham, Director of the Kellogg Institute, or Peggy Mock, National Center for Developmental Education, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608 (704-262-3057).

Call For Papers

Council Of Writing Program Administrators Summer Conference

July 26-28, 1988

Miami University Oxford, Ohio

Sessions at this conference will consist of workshops, papers, and informal discussions or panels on topics pertinent to the administration of writing programs. Deadline for submissions: April 1, 1989. Proposals must include a title, a brief description indicating the purpose of the presentation, an abstract of 500 words, a list of other presenters involved, a list of audio-visual equipment needed and your name, address, and phone number(s). Send to: WPA Annual Conference. Jeffrey Sommers, Program Chair, Department of English, Miami University, Middletown, Ohio 45042.

13th Annual Conference

National Association for Developmental Education

March 2-4, 1989

Hyatt Regency Hotel Cincinnati, Ohio

For registration information, contact Dr. Gene Beckett, NADE '89 Registrar, Shawnee State University, Second Street, Portsmouth, OH 45662 (614-355-2277).

The context-sensitivity problem in models and exercises for the writing lab

In their recent book about nonstandard dialects and developmental writing problems, Marcia Farr and Harvey Daniels argue in favor of using students' own writing instead of exercises to work with writing problems. The latter, they argue, too often "are decontextualized, disembedded from the kinds of meaningful contexts in which they might be mastered relatively naturally" (76). Although Farr and Daniels don't illustrate what they are talking about, I want to take a few paragraphs to do so because it involves some very important aspects of what we do with lab students. What Farr and Daniels point to is the same issue which ESL theorists call the "authenticity" problem (Robinson 40). In other words, exercises and models used in writing labs- as well as for classes- too often bear no resemblance to the kind of writing that occurs in real contexts, especially the contexts for which students are tying to learn to write. In fact, the essence of the problem is that too often exercises are not consistent with culturally-determined form/ context relationships.

Such form/context relationships have been the object of composition research for several years; this sort of research has even cracked a few codes, showing how writers use certain forms in certain discourse situations. For instance, many years ago, J.C. Seegars discovered his grade school students using more dependent clauses in their expository and argumentative papers than in descriptive and narrative pieces; in short, the complexity of thought and the nature of the discourse necessitated certain syntactic patterns. More recently, Gregory West found that scientific writers used fewer that-nominal syntactic patterns in the Methodology sections than elsewhere in their articles; West reasoned that writers were less apt to make statements about other statements in Methodology sections, thus not needing to use the conventional device for meaning that meaning. Very recently, Paige Dayton found that her college freshmen had more sentence fragments in narrative and descriptive personal-experience writing than they did in detached informative writing. Al-though Dayton doesn't explore this idea, her students were evidently responding to a cultural intuition about informal language: fragments were natural to use because the personal experience written context resembles the information speaking context, where fragments are common.

Unfortunately, too often the models any exercises available for labs actually work against this cultural form/context relationship Let me illustrate by reference to materials frorr three developmental writing texts I have on my shelf; although my examples are not, of course comprehensive, they are representative of the kinds of materials we often work with.

My first example deals with global organizational patterns in McKoski and Hahn': book The Developing Wetter: A Guide to Basic Skills. McKoski and Hahn spend three pages discussing the value of a thesis statement, which they then go on to illustrate In a model essay: "A summer spent in the country when] was eighteen years old was one of the most satisfying times of my life" (190). After this model, McKoski and Hahn offer a set of short writing exert (191-192) on the following topics to help students produce their own essays with thesis statements:

The Teacher I Liked Most

A Significant Experience That Changed the Way I Felt or Thought

Something Important I Have Learned

Unfortunately, McKoski and Hahn's model and writing exercises do not fit the form they are trying to teach. For one thing, these subjects rarely (except in English classes) appear in real public written discourse. They are more characteristic of conversation (maybe a high-level bull session or a sensitivity sessions with an encounter group) or, more likely, the private discourse of one's own diary or journal. The thesis form that McKoski and Hahn pre-scribe is characteristic of a very different con-text: academic writing. Who uses (or needs) a thesis statement in a journal? Moreover, the subject matter McKoski and Hahn use for them exercises creates a form/context mismatch in another way: it forces students into talking about themselves (using first person point of

view) in an academic paper, something that research by Chafe and Danielewlcz shows to be very rare.

A second example of form/context mismatching involves the section on topic sentences in Teresa Glazier's very popular The Least You Should Know about English: Basic Writing Skills. Glazier offers students a model paragraph, complete with topic sentence:

On Sunday afternoon I drove on some of my favorite country roads and was glad to see that most of the roadsides had not been mowed and thus remained a haven for birds and small animals as well as an encouraging place for wild flowers. The Black-eyed Susans were plentiful among the white-flowered fleabanes and Queen Anne's Lace. I even saw a few plants from the endangered species list. As I approached Troublesome Creek, several quail were in the road and were reluctant to make way for my car. It was plain that it was their tell Rory and that I was an intruder. Then a squirrel raced across the road, and some baby rabbits hopped about among the low bushes. After a while I returned to the highway and to the monotonous border of miles and miles of mowed grass.

The problem is that, like the thesis statements with personal subjects noted above, a topic sentence doesn't work very well in this con-text- in fact, it intrudes. On the whole, topic sentences are useful devices for previewing ideas so as to help out readers as they progress through concept-laden texts (Kieras). But Glazier's example text doesn't have much direct ideational content; instead it reads more like fiction, perhaps from a personal reflective essay written by a columnist like Ellen Goodman. Just as in fiction, the narrative/descriptive details accumulate as the paragraph develops-that is part of the pleasure of reading it. Readers don't need a topic sentence (especially the parts after "country roads" in sentence one) to preview it for them. As text research suggests, creative-oriented essays have less likelihood of containing topic sentences than do academic articles (Popken 216). The point is that if Glazier wanted students to learn to use topic sentences, she should have given them situations where they could do it.

My last illustration of form being out of sync with context involves a syntactic issue in

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Peter Dow Adams' Connections: A Guide to the Basics of Writing. Adams has a two-page section on using transitional devices followed by some exercises where students draw from a list of conjunctives to fill in the blanks (the answers written in italics are mine, selected from the list):

Max is hard to get along with; further-more, he frequently is moody.

Sylvia sprained her ankle badly: consequently, she has to stop jogging for a few weeks.

I want to finish my homework; nevertheless. I will play cards.

They dried their hair and put on makeup; as a result, they were ready to go. (193-94)

The register here is jumbled: While the exercises are from informal oral contexts, they force students to use formal written language for the linking words.

While I am not so pessimistic as Farr and Daniels about lab and classroom exercises for developmental writers, I do think that we need to be more careful in what we use. Unfortunately, many of the problems I have suggested in this brief survey result from good pedagogical intentions, the sort of thing ex-pressed by a writing instructor at a conference I attended last summer: "College students who are learning to write need to have fun, so I use exercises and materials to help them do that! They can worry about the serious, academic stuff later on." If we make writing " fun" by using material suitable for other contexts, we may actually violate the form/context relation-ship and, in so doing, prevent our students from ever applying to real situations what we are trying to teach them. I suggest that lab exercises combine the kind of sensitivity to context that one finds in many language-forspecial-purposes (ESL) textbooks (e.g., Adams and Dwyer) with the principles of controlled composition (Gorrell). If we design our own exercises, we should continue to draw upon available knowledge from research on context as well as on our own linguistic intuitions.

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Software for the writing lab: A series of reviews

Most writing teachers who have worked with computers have probably discovered that computers aren't the educational panacea they are sometimes advertised to be but that they do have two advantages over pencil and paper. First, they make changing and entering text faster and easier-owning a word processing program means never having to retype a page. Second, students often find them attractive and will happily stare into a monitor even when they cannot seem to fix their gaze on a workbook or a blank sheet of paper.

By and large, the most successful soft-ware for writing students makes the best use of those two advantages. With this in mind, I shall consider seven new software programs. One is an invention program; four invite students to complete texts in order to sharpen the] reading and writing skills; one is a data base designed to assist students or teachers in sorting and keeping information; and the last is a word processor which includes a handbook. For further information about the RDA/Mind Builders programs, write to P.Q. Box 848, Stony Brook, NY 11790.

PROTEUS: The Idea Processor
(available for Apple and Commodore)

PROTEUS provides a computerized version of five familiar heuristics: freewriting, looping, listing, cubing, and the five Ws. For example, in the freewriting mode, the writer chooses a subject, enters it at the top of the screen, then responds to the prompt >TYPE IN YOUR IDEAS. If the writer pauses for ten seconds or more, the message KEEP WRITING begins to flash at the bottom of the screen. In the cubing mode, the writer responds to prompts corresponding to the six sides of the cube- "define it," "compare it," etc. Once the writer has explored one idea in any or all of the modes, the results of the session can be saved or converted to a file which can be edited with a word processing program. (PROTEUS is not a word processor.)

In my estimation, the attraction factor constitutes PROTEUS's main advantage-students who especially like to work on computers could be initiated into the joys of invention with this program. In fact, some of the writers who praised PROTEUS highly in computer

journals seemed especially entranced with the heuristics, which they had clearly never en-countered before.

For me, however, these computerized devices lacked the flexibility and fluidity of pencil and paper. In planning a document on paper, I often move up, down, and sideways- a cluster of causes might appear in a corner, or an arrow might connect a key work to a question about it. In PROTEUS, I had to stay with one sequence of thought unless I wanted to stop, save the material, and begin with some-thing. I felt constrained by the necessity for switching screens between modes and by the prevailing linearity of the program.

In all probability, the limitations of PROTEUS don't reflect any lack of inventiveness on the part of the program's designers. To provide the flexibility I'm describing, an invention program would have to include windows and elaborate menus which take up much more than the 64K which comprise the Apple's memory. When the author, Bob Leonard, writes in the user's guide that "PROTEUS is possibly the best help you can get with your computer facilities" [emphasis mine], he's probably right.

MARK-UP, SEQUITUR, RHUBARB

(all available for Apple and Commodore; DOUBLE-UP and SEQUITUR also avail-able for PC-compatible DOS)

Each of these programs makes use of the computer's ability to replace and rearrange text. In MARK-UP, the student confronts an unpunetuated text written in all capital letters. She must restore the punctuation marks and capitals by typing in words along with whatever punctuation marks might accompany them.
The correct punctuation marks in random order and the total number of capital letters appear below the text and disappear as the student enters them correctly. In DOUBLE-UP, the student must reconstruct a short text from an alphabetical list of the words contained in that text. She guesses by typing in any two words she thinks might appear together in the original text. If she is correct, the two words appear above in their correct positions, and the student continues guessing until she has completed the passage.

SEQUITUR applies the same principle to larger portions of text. The first sentence or

phrase of a short passage appears on the screen, along with three possible phrases which might come next. The student selects the one which should come next. If she is correct, the phrase is added to the passage, a new set of alternatives appears, and the game continues until the passage is entirely reconstructed. In RHUBARB, the most challenging of these replacement games, an entire text has been masked with repetitions of the word "rhubarb." With only a title and her own sense of the language to guide her, the student begins guessing words which might appear in the text. Each time she guesses correctly, all the appear-ances of that word are unmasked.

In the course of playing any of these games, the student can ask for help and obtain one correct response. (In RHUBARB, for ex-ample, she can move the cursor to a specific word and have that word unmasked.) She can also quit at any point and have the entire correct text displayed,and she can ask the program to keep score. Students can also play RHUBARB in a challenge mode- the program will keep score for two players or two teams.

My students and I found all of these programs, especially DOUBLE-UP and RHUBARB, very enjoyable and utterly absorbing. ALL four programs worked with all levels of students, but the developmental students preferred the more accessible MARK-UP (one of them complained that RHUBARB worked on her nerves), and the more advanced students preferred RHUBARB (one of them remarked that it absorbed her so thoroughly that she forgot her problems.) After several afternoons of playing RHUBARB until after five o'clock while books lay unopened, essays remained unwritten, and children waited to be picked up, a few of my technical writing students declared themselves addicted.

All four programs run very easily; no one needed the clear and detailed instructions that the editors provide. Some, especially MARK-UP, contained some annoying minor glitches-omitted words, a correct response labeled "isn't right yet," etc. Also, MARK-UP might benefit by more tutorial, some explanation of punctuation rules rather than the curt " isn't right yet." One final word under complaints/suggestions: my fellow RHUBARB addicts and I felt cheated when a word turned out to be a proper name that could not possibly have been guessed. To what extent do these programs help teach

writing? In a way, the answer to that question depends upon the amount of time the teacher/ tutor can invest. With little or no input from the instructor, students playing any of these games still must draw upon their knowledge of linguistic conventions such as grammar and punctuation rules and the logic of narrative. Most of the students I observed seemed to use this knowledge unconsciously, but they used it nevertheless.

On the other hand, because teachers and tutors can add texts, each of the programs can be adapted to specific pedagogical ends. For example, teachers of foreign languages could easily use any of them; in fact, some of them already include text in foreign languages. For the English teacher, any number of uses come to mind: A specialized version of MARK-UP could address a student's confusion about, say, restrictive and non-restrictive clauses; students could play DOUBLE-UP with typical textbook passages and thereby become familiar with their logic; passages from Pope and Dryden could be entered into SEQUITUR to familiarize students with the structure of the heroic couplet; and a RHUBARB paragraph with all its connectives unmasked could help a student understand paragraph coherence.

Adding new texts presents relatively little diff iculty in MARK-UP and DOUBLE-UP. With the Apple versions of these programs. the editors have provided a word processing program   Free Writer and detailed instructions for using FrEd Writer to create new texts for the games. SEQUITUR and RHUBARB contain built-in text editor programs which allow the user to add new texts by means of a complicated series of steps. The editors provide detailed instructions for completing those steps, but they can't foresee every possible error or confusion, so some frustration seems inevitable. The editors counsel patience and promise "believe it or not, after a while, it becomes rather easy." After I had successfully entered my Zora Neale Hurston text, I understood the need for patience, but I also believed the promise. At these inexpensive site-license prices, one or two of these programs are worth buying even if they function only as bribes for coming to the lab or rewards for working there. For the teacher/tutor who can spend some time, any one of them can be an excellent teaching tool.

RAPID RECALL II
(available for Apple and Commodore)

RAPID RECALL II is a database, which simply means that it provides the user with the means of storing, organizing, retrieving, and printing information. The user creates "pages" for what the editors call an "electronic note-book," and those pages function somewhat like index cards, which can be ordered in any number of ways according to the information recorded on them. For example, a writing lab director might create a notebook page for every student or for every visit, recording information about the student, the course for which she was writing, and the method used to assist her. The Director could then use "matchcodes" to call up the pages for all the sophomores, all students taking Professor X's English 100 course, or all the students working with a particular tutor; and the resulting lists could be alphabetized (or otherwise re-ordered) and printed. Any word or combination of words which might appear on the pages can function as a match code.

The program comes with detailed instructions, a tutorial which uses the demonstration disk provided, and a series of sample applications. Many of those sample applications show how RAPID RECALL II can be used for preparing documents as well as for keeping records. Certainly, a student (or a faculty member) might use the program's notebook pages like note cards in preparing a research paper.

As I see it, however, this use has some limitations. For one thing, the user probably can't carry a computer into the library. Also, RAPID RECALL's printouts can't readily be edited into MLA style, so bibliography entries would have to be retyped for a "Works Cited" section. I did find that I could use my operating system to transfer a RAPID RECALL notebook to another disk, then delete RAPID RECAll's commands and replace them with WordStar's. Though that process took a little time, it beat retyping. Though I'm not familiar enough with database programs to compare RAPID RECALL to similar programs, I can easily see its usefulness in a writing lab, especially for record keeping.

Norton Textra Writer
W.W. Norton & Company, $ 19.95
(available for IBM PC and compatibles)

One day last spring the usually cautious head of the Business Division at Louisiana

State University-Eunice startled me by waxing wildly effusive over some new word processing program put out by Norton. After testing Norton Textra Writer, I'm ready to effuse a bit myself. This program does practically everything my expensive WordStar does for less than the price of a week's worth of diet TV dinners. On top of that, Textra Writer is remarkably easy to use. It's menu driven, which means that the commands the user is most likely to need at any given stage are listed on the bottom of the screen, I was able to write a couple of documents with it the first time I sat down without once consulting the manual. For the user with little or no experience with word processing, Textra Writer offers four levels of tutorials, including "film-on-disk" sequences which graphically illustrate elements of word processing such as the keyboard,

Textra Writer also provides plenty of help with the writing process itself in the form of an "on-line" handbook. That means that the student who wants help with writing or editing can press a couple of function keys and read the necessary information directly from the screen, then press the escape key to return to her text.

The on-line handbook contains nine standard handbook sections, each accessible with a different function key: the essay, sentences, grammar, usage glossary, punctuation, mechanics, and documentation. The examples and discussions in these sections, which are based on Norton's Writing, A College Handbook, are as clear and helpful as those in any good bound handbook. A tenth handbook section, "edition symbols," provides the student with instant explanations of marks the teacher or other students might use in grading or editing her paper. In fact, a teacher might even require students to hand in disks and grade on screen rather than on paper- another potential time-saver.

Textra Writer's low price and ease of use make word processing available to any student who has some access to a DOS system. And, as many writers and writing teachers have already discovered, word processing makes for easier editing and better text not only in freshman composition but throughout a writing lifetime.

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