WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Vol. II, No. 9 (May, 1978)

On this page you'll find James Hill's report of his discussion group which formed part of this year's 4 C's Special Interest Session on Writing Labs, and we hope to have more reports next month. However, the June issue will bring to a close Vol. II of our newsletter (so that you and I can adjourn for a much needed summer vacation); therefore, if you have an announcement or some information of immediate interest to our readers, please send it to me by May 15, for the June issue.

Since we hope to have the newsletter continue next year, anything received after May 15 will be saved for fall issues. Please send your articles, names of new members, and donations of $2 (with checks made payable to me) to:

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A 4 C's Report: The Writing Lab as Supplement to Freshman English

(Session leaders: Betty Bamburg, U.S.C., and James S. Hill, O.S.U.)

The special session on the Writing Lab at the 4 C's in Denver was an enlightening experience, especially the session on the lab as a supplement to the classroom. This session was a potpourri of diverse suggestions, ideas, and questions, many of which were from individuals who were planning on starting their own lab in the future. Although many of the issues discussed were not resolved in any definitive manner, the following ideas were among the most important areas discussed concerning the Writing Lab and the classroom: 1. continuity of instruction in the classroom and lab, 2. the use of grammatical exercises in the lab as opposed to composition, 3. general expense of operating a lab, 4. accountability to the English Department, 5. the importance of effective communication between the lab and classroom, 6. the psychological implications of the lab as a place of learning rather than for "bad" students, 7. referral procedures--drop in or appointment, 8. the lab as one hour credit in addition to the classroom, 9. the importance of having a rhetorician in the English Department who can oversee and organize the format of the lab, and 10. the use of teaching assistants in the lab.

Betty Bamberg spoke at length on the importance of establishing effective lines of communication between the English Department and the Writing Lab, so that the student's work in the lab and the classroom maintained some degree of continuity. She also mentioned that at U.S.C. the Writing Lab had been considered a "dungeon" by many students, but after an effective public relations campaign of posters and advertisements, the student body gradually lost its inhibitions about the remedial English student being in the lab.

James S. Hill also added seminal comments, especially about the crucial need of the lab to initially demonstrate to the remedial student that he can write something worthwhile and meaningful--a significant task for many remedial English students. This situation is accomplished in the repeated use of paragraph composition/revision until the paragraph is grammatically and structurally acceptable. Such a tool demonstrates to the student that effective writing is a tedious process, not an immediate product. This exercise is quite helpful in breaking down many of the psychological and personal inhibitions the remedial student has about his own writing.

On the whole, our session appeared to be quite lively, and the response from other participants was most enthusiastic and helpful.

James S. Hill
Oklahoma State University

Saint John's WRITING WORKSHOP: A Summary of the First Semester Report

DEFINITION

The WRITING WORKSHOP at Saint John's University[1], open four hours per day at a variety of times, is set up as a drop-in center to serve any member of the St. John's community-students, staff, faculty--who has a problem or a question concerning his writing. It is also meant to augment the Freshman Colloquium program[2] by providing poorly-prepared students with extra (sometimes even remedial) help in all/any aspects of composition. Student clients may come for help on a voluntary basis or may be referred by a concerned instructor. In referral cases, the instructor is sent progress reports both at mid-semester and at semester's end.

A client may simply "drop-in" to see if the counselor is free, or he may make a specific appointment by signing his name to the appointment schedule posted near the Workshop door. The available twenty hours per week is broken into fifteen minute time blocks.

A client may sign for any amount of time, but appointments lasting more than one hour are discouraged: the usual appointment length is one-half hour. Once the client has an interview, the time is his--he and the counselor work on whatever problems the client wants solved. Each appointment is individual. In some cases a client wants merely an immediate solution to a specific problem; in other cases a client sets up an entire program to solve general writing deficiencies and to improve his writing on a long range basis. Very often, the client's own work is used as instructional material. From personal work, problems can be diagnosed, explained, and corrected. Often prepared handout materials or textbook references are used to explain problems and offer solutions, and personal writing is used as an exercise in correction.

A simple three-part system of record-keeping helps the counselor prepare specially for each client as that client's name reappears on the appointment schedule. During or after each appointment, the counselor notes 1) problems encountered, 2) problems worked on and materials used, and 3) specific recommendations for problems to be worked on during the next appointment. These records are open to the client, and often the third area--that of future work--is decided jointly by client and counselor.

STAFFING AND TIME UTILIZATION

The Workshop was operative for twenty hours per week with one counselor on duty. Clients used 64% of the available time.

CLIENTS

The Workshop served 169 clients during its first semester: ten of these were faculty or staff; the other 159 were students.

As was expected, Freshmen made up the largest group of student clients. The complete breakdown by class follows:

freshmen	87	14% of the freshman class	8% of the entire student body
sophomores	40	total upperclassmen 72	
juniors	19		
seniors	12		
?	1		

The students came to the Workshop for a variety of reasons.

EVALUATION

During the last week of the semester, a WRITING WORKSHOP Evaluation Form was sent to almost every client. Faculty and staff clients received their forms directly through the inter-office mail system; student clients received their forms via the instructor of the class for which they visited the Workshop. This method of distribution served the dual purpose of getting the forms to the student clients and of giving the instructor a list of the students who had used the Workshop services for his class.

The clients generally evaluated the Workshop favorably. Although eight were unsure, none of the clients responded that their Workshop work was unproductive, and 68 said it was helpful. Positive comments about the Workshop fell into three categories: the counselor, the atmosphere, and the type of instruction; students seemed to especially appreciate the friendliness, the informality and the individual attention. Over half of the clients responded "No" to the question "Was there something you disliked about the WRITING WORKSHOP?" most who did have a complaint requested that

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[1]St. John's University, a small liberal arts college for men, has an enrollment of almost 2,000 students.

[2]The Freshman Colloquium program is a required, year-long, small group seminar which has replaced the Freshman English writing requirement. The course emphasizes study, speech, reading, and writing skills through study of a specific topic within a chosen discipline.

more time be made available (the others requested services which are not appropriate to the Workshop). The general response was overwhelmingly positive, and all suggestions for improvement involved expansion--or time, counselors, publicity or materials.

SUMMARY

The WRITING WORKSHOP had an encouraging and exciting first semester. It served 8% of the student body; 14% of the freshman class used its services; 100% of the Colloquium faculty were involved through either personal or student participation. At least 64% of the available time was utilized by clients; and those clients evaluated their Workshop experiences very favorably.

Jane Z. Opitz
Saint John's University

(If you are interested in obtaining a copy of the complete and very informative 17-page report on which this summary is based, plus sample evaluation forms used, please write to Professor Opitz, Department of English Writing Workshop, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minn. 56321--Editor's note)

Freshman Foundation Program at
West Virginia State College

In reading the March, 1978 issue of the Writing Lab Newsletter, I was impressed by the compassion which exuded from the article contributed by Mr. Hill of Oklahoma State University. That article set me to thinking that I have again been negligent in sharing some neat stuff with you.

About a year ago we began planning to systematically deal with what we thought were the two principal barriers that underprepared students encounter in attempting to acquire literary skills: (1) the lack of contextualization of skills acquisition activities characteristic of developmental writing programs, and (2) the general lack of acknowledgment by college and university professors of the "personness" of students. What we ended up creating was an interdisciplinary approach to the entire Freshman year which is governed by the premises that (1) students need to see the immediate relevance in settings outside the English classroom (or Lab) of language acquisition activities, and (2) students are first people, then students. We are now midway through the first semester of the program. It seems to work. We'll reserve published judgment of the program until we have a couple of years of data to analyze, but the idea is certainly worth considering.

For a quick overview of the program, write to me c/o English Language Skills Lab, West Virginia State College, Institute, West Va. 25112.

Jon Jonz
Director, English Language
Skills Lab
West Virginia State College

Jim Kolsky's suggestion in the January Newsletter for an "employment desired" or a "qualified lab person needed" column seems an excellent one to me mainly because I am interested in shifting my own employment to an institution with a developmental writing program and/or a Writing Lab.

At Purdue, I am in the Ph.D. program in the Teaching of English (major fields in Composition, Linguistics, and Early American Literature) with all work finished but the dissertation, which will be on sentence combining from a psycholinguistic point of view. My twenty years of teaching on almost all levels has included freshman, advanced, technical and adult extension composition courses, and, for the past two years, I have been working in the Writing Lab here under the superb direction of Professor Muriel Harris. During the summer of 1977, I directed the lab.

In the lab, I have tutored students on all levels including many foreign students and grad students. I have done course work in ESL and am an active member of TESOL. In addition, I have developed a self-instruction module (tape and master notebook) on sentence combining and one on the concept of audience.

My phone number is (317) 439-3694 after 4:30

Janice Kleen
215-4 Nimitz Drive
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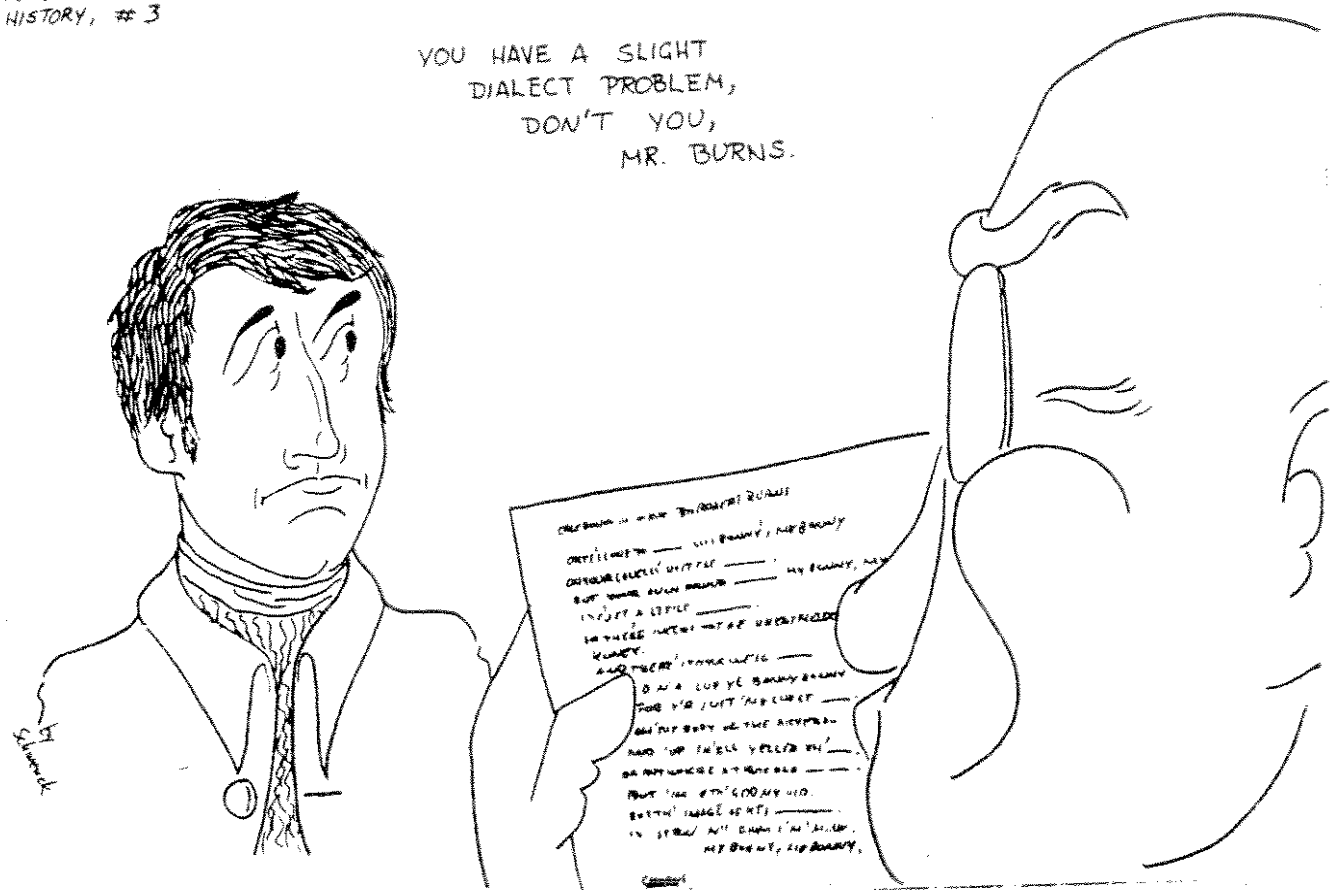
At Beaver College, Glenside, PA (suburban Philadelphia), we have established a Writing Center staffed by student tutors who have been specially trained to help their fellow students to get started in writing. The student tutors are most enthusiastic about their role and have taken upon themselves the job of publicizing the Center to their fellow students in memos and newspaper articles.

The Writing Center is one activity of our college-wide writing program funded by an institutional development grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Elaine P. Maimon
Director of Writing
Beaver College



The Individualized Learning Center at P.C.C.

The Individualized Learning Center at Parkersburg Community College was founded several years ago to help students with problems in mathematics and English. The English section offered the usual kinds of courses in spelling, punctuation, review of grammar, remedial composition, etc. Faculty found that individualizing the instruction to fit a student's needs was very effective and decided to extend the method to include college-level composition, technical writing, business writing, and finally literature courses also.

The decision to have the Individualized Learning Center (ILC), a considerable enlargement of the traditional writing laboratory or remedial laboratory, was based not only on the success of the original courses but also upon a need to solve two serious problems for community colleges: the extremely wide range of academic preparation and experience of students and the difficulty of scheduling classes for part-time students: women with families, for example, and shift workers.

Placement is the traditional way of solving the first of the problems mentioned above. If one of our students is going to take a reading, English, or mathematics course, he is tested. For reading, the Nelson-Denny test is given; for English, a writing sample is taken. The student is asked to write about any topic and given half an hour for writing. A member of the English faculty reads the sample and recommends the proper English course: English 47, Pre-college Writing or English 111, Introductory Composition. Placement is based on such things as the student's control of paragraphing, sentence variety, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and other criteria.

But even with placement to classify students by basic competency there is still a wide range, perhaps not capabilities or general level of knowledge but, of problems which students bring into the traditional classroom. Individuals have individual problems. Every classroom teacher experiences it. Even if office conferences and other methods come close to solving individual academic problems, there is still the problem of scheduling. Parkersburg Community College has developed a solution to both problems: the option of the Individualized Learning Center, (ILC). Students may enroll in either the

traditional classroom of ILC sections for remedial and college parallel courses. There are nearly 60 courses offered in the ILC, not only in English but in Reading, Mathematics, Accounting, Business, Law Enforcement, Child Development, and Logic.

In order to understand how the problems of widely ranging academic preparation and scheduling are solved in the ILC, we will look at what a student would do when he has completed placement testing, if he wants to take general composition, and if he is also a shift worker. First the student goes to the ILC to register for the course. The secretary assigns him to an instructor at a time which will fit best into the student's work schedule. The student is usually signed up for a three-hour block or two one-and-one-half hour sessions.

On the day the student begins classes, he's given a folder, which will be used to file his written work and to record attendance; and he is also introduced to his teacher. One of the things which the student notices immediately as he enters the center is that not all students are working on the same course, and using the same materials; soon he also learns that he progresses at a pace different from that of others. The student, after mentioning that he is a shift worker, will be informed of his teacher's evening schedule and of his privilege to change times as his job demands. As soon as the student begins working on his course, he will also notice that his teacher often chooses materials to fit the student's particular needs and will work individually with him when he has difficulties. With flexible scheduling and individual attention, two serious problems of the students are solved.

Another characteristic of the ILC which most affects students, particularly students taking remedial courses, is that there is no separation of students by course within subject areas. Students taking remedial courses are not separated and stigmatized by such a separation. Nor do students in the college-parallel courses feel embarrassed by any special problems or deficiencies. This open and accepting atmosphere allows the remedial student to work up through remedial courses in English, and study skills and then to continue college-parallel courses in the same environment.

The description of the student's first encounter with the ILC indicates that several characteristics distinguish it from many writing labs and learning centers. In the ILC each student is assigned a teacher and a scheduled time. He is not told to come in at any time and see any teacher available. In this way student-teacher relationships are maintained. Students in laboratory settings are usually able to develop good rapport with their teachers; and when this relationship between learner and teacher is combined with continuity of instruction with one instructor, the rapport is increased. Requiring students to attend at certain times also provides discipline and structure which both teacher and student need. In the ILC the student must attend the required number of hours per week (for a three credit course, three hours), but he may come in at any time as long as his teacher is scheduled. This flexibility does cause some occasional problems, but mostly attendance is even.

Because the courses are individualized, students may register for and begin classes at any time during the usual school term. They also finish the course whenever they have fulfilled course requirements. Some students are thus able to complete two courses during one regular term. But students who have more difficulties and cannot complete the work in one term may take up to two terms or nine months to complete a course. The student and his teacher set the pace.

Changing education to better solve student problems also changes what faculty members characteristically do. The most apparent change is in scheduling of a faculty member's time. In order to accommodate students with varying schedules, teachers are regularly assigned to teach at least one evening per week, most often two evenings. But this is not the only alteration in usual faculty schedules. Since students get individual attention during regularly scheduled times, faculty do not keep office hours. Instead, they are assigned 25 hours in the ILC (to be equivalent with the classroom teacher's 15 class hours + 10 office hours). These 25 hours also allow faculty members to maintain and exceed funding requirements so that the program is cost effective.

Another change which faculty must make when teaching in the individualized mode concerns the number of courses taught and the preparations. ILC English faculty members teach a wide range of courses, ranging from Business Communications to Literature, to Basic Composition. This wide

range is necessary because of the freedom which students have in registering and because of the need to maintain a high funding ratio. Since so many courses are taught, each course must be fully prepared and organized before the term begins, and faculty members usually need a great deal of preparation time before they begin teaching in the ILC. The preparation time is spent learning about materials, methods, and texts produced or adapted by the ILC staff. Curricular development becomes the responsibility of the faculty as a whole, and individual faculty prepare course materials for use by all faculty teaching a course. This preparation is often done during summers when faculty are awarded performance contracts to develop materials.

Not only are the ways of preparing course materials changed; but, because the instructor may have as many as 20 students per hour and could have them all working on different courses or levels within a course, he or she must radically change teaching styles and course organization; lecturing, for instance is impossible although audio tapes can be substituted. Materials must be geared to allow students to learn on their own to a great extent. Various kinds of re-teaching materials are also prepared to help students get through difficult sections of courses. Most of the teacher's work is the selection of best mateials for individual students, explaining concepts where materials are inadequate, and taking care of individual problems. In mathematics and English, para-professional and work-study students are also used to assist teachers. They will distribute materials, correct texts and quizzes (particularly in mathematics) and in general do whatever their skills allow. The teacher in the ILC situation becomes something of a manager.

Besides the change in teaching styles, a somewhat different philosophy of course organization has been adopted in the ILC. Courses in the ILC are designed to be developmental, that is, sequential, with each successive step building on the one which came before, so that in any course a student may proceed to more advanced skills only after he has mastered the elementary skills. Diagnostic and placement testing is used to discover what least amount of skills the student has and what skills the student needs to fulfill the course objectives. With this emphasis on the sequential nature of skills in course objectives, the student is better able to work on his own at a pace which is compatible for him.

In summary, the ILC is student centered. It makes both college-level and remedial courses developmental and competency based, and it makes scheduling of faculty fit student needs.

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Parkersburg Community College

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