WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

We continue to look forward to receiving your articles for the newsletter, names of new members for the mailing list, and donations of $2 (with checks made payable to me) to help defray the duplicating and mailing costs. Please write to:

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EVALUATION/ACCOUNTABILITY FOR THE WRITING LAB

No matter the size of the writing lab, for several different purposes and at several different points in its development, the director has to justify the lab's existence. We have all had to discover ways to demonstrate what we know is the tremendous effectiveness of the writing lab experience for our students. Many of us have had to expend so much effort convincing our funders of the need for a writing lab in the first place that I think that we have not adequately addressed the need for evaluation and the key issues involved: To whom are we primarily accountable? What information is most important to obtain for an evaluation? What purposes should the evaluation serve?

To date, the most frequently used measures of writing lab effectiveness are: numbers of students using the lab and the number of visits to the lab, course grades achieved by students using the lab, anecdotal responses by classroom faculty to the lab as an aid for their students.

Such data can serve to demonstrate that numbers of students use the writing lab, and that frequently those students appreciate the time and attention they are given in the lab. Course grade statistics do show that some students who are short on writing skills can pass their freshman comp courses with the help of the lab, but they also show numbers of students who don't pass their courses the first time through even with the help of the lab. Classroom instructors' responses often give the lab staff a needed pat on the back and assure them that they are doing an adequate job.

These measures are important and useful, but they are directed primarily to the lab staff and to the funders of the lab. They do not even attempt to account to the student for his investment of time and labor at the writing lab, nor do they indicate the progress that does not show up in the final grade reports. At Youngstown State we have found that by centering our evaluation concerns on the individual student we can generate far more valuable data first for the students, but also for our staff, our faculty, and our funders.

Briefly, our evaluation procedure entails error analysis of writing samples done at the start and at the end of the term. After analyzing a first writing sample and the student's edited versions, the student and the lab instructor plan a lab program focusing on a specific error in writing to be eliminated at the end of a given period of time in the lab. The first writing sample and error analysis are sent to the classroom instructor along with the lab program the student has begun. Throughout the quarter, the lab program aims at increased fluency for all students in addition to elimination of the specific focus-errors for each student. As time permits additional errors may be added for focus in the lab program.

At the end of the term, the student writes again on a similar topic as at the start. Total number of words and paragraphs and rates

of occurrence of focus-errors are compared.
The information is shared with the student
and his course instructor. At the end of
the year it is included in the general re-
port for the writing lab along with the oth-
er data on numbers of student visits,etc.

The procedure, of course, has some draw-
backs. More training is necessary for the
lab staff than previously. There is a great
deal more time involved in diagnosis: where be-
fore we relied heavily on the course instruc-
tor's hastily checked lab referral form, we
now have to do the initial work ourselves.
Since we are not waiting for nor solely rely-
ing on the course instructor's recommendation,
there is occasional disagreement between lab
instructor and course instructor. Course
instructors are not used to two-way communi-
cation with the lab, and some are slow to
listen.

However, we have found that the lab bene-
fits far outweigh the drawbacks. Lab staff
members who are trained in careful diagnosis
of writing problems become superior tutors;
the time spent in training is invaluable.
While more time is spent in the initial diag-
nosis and program planning with each student,
time is not wasted on misdirected lab study,
and time does not have to be spent motivat-
ing and re-motivating students who just
can't see the point of their work in the lab.
Though course instructors are not used to
fully sharing instruction with the writing
lab staff, they are finding that because we
have more time for careful diagnosis, we are
able to share insights and information not
previously available to them. Because they
see our detailed analysis and diagnosis of
their students' papers, they are becoming bet-
ter diagnosticians themselves.

Additional benefits accrue with regard to
lab effectiveness and accountability:

1. Since the student devises his own lab
   program and evaluates his progress
   with the lab instructor, he becomes ac-
   countable. Because lab work is nar-
   rowly focused and progress is demon-
   strable, motivation remains high
   through the term.

2. It is possible to demonstrate real pro-
   gress made even by students who may
   not pass their freshman writing course
   the first time through.

3. The results obtained for any student
   provide a much more accurate assessment
   of progress than any objective test.

4. While pre- and post-test measures are
   tailored to each individual, the results
   are numerical and capable of statisti-
   cal analysis and comparison among stu-
   dents.

5. The primary indicator of our total lab
   program effectiveness is the progress
   made by each student in the most trouble-
   some skill area encountered by each stu-
   dent.

6. Demanding thorough diagnosis and evalua-
   tion has profoundly altered our staff's
   perceptions of their function and their
   effectiveness. It is enormously satisfy-
   ing for the tutor to see clear evidence
   of progress where before it was only
   vaguely sensed.

We have answered the questions raised earlier
thus:
We are accountable primarily to our students;
it is most important to collect information
which enables us to demonstrate even small areas
of progress made by students. Our evaluation
procedure provides instructional focus for lab
staff and students, diagnostic information for
classroom faculty, and accountability data to
both clients and funders.

Nancy McCracken
Youngstown State University

Do We Need Materials for ESL
and Engineering Students?

In Purdue's Writing Lab we've come to real-
ize that there are two large groups of stu-
dents, foreign students and engineering stu-
dents, whom we are not adequately serving be-
cause we are so overcrowded and for whom we
ought to develop some self-instruction mate-
rials to supplement and add to the tutorial
instruction we now offer. A proposal is
presently being written to seek funds for a
materials development project to do this, and
your comments, reactions, and suggestions
would be a great help to us.

For the engineering students, we hope to
write a series of approximately twenty-four
modules. One set of twelve programs would
be short modules on inter-related principles

of grammar which are frequent sources of error in student writing. For example, in a short module on the comma, before explaining the need for a comma after introductory clauses, we'd have a pre-test section that would determine whether or not the student can recognize such clauses. If not, he can go the short module on dependent clauses which would also be available, if needed, before starting the module on fragments, and so on.

What would make this series different (and, we hope, better) than what already exists is that we would first conduct an extensive survey of reports written in engineering courses to see which errors really crop up and which are most frequently commented on by the engineering course instructors. In a preliminary survey, we've already found several points of grammar which frequently cause problems in freshman composition course papers and in engineering course reports, but which are not treated in any of the self-instruction materials we've seen. For example, the unnecessary or confusing shifting of verb tenses turns out to be a serious source of error in engineering reports. Another difference in these materials would be that they use content-related materials in the examples. To illustrate various rules and to offer practice in such skills as proofreading, we would use examples from engineering texts. Our hope, in doing so, is that these students would more easily see the connection between what they are studying in the writing lab and what they are writing for their engineering courses.

The other twelve modules would be longer and treat rhetorical concerns such as clarity, the need for transitions to create unity, methods of organizing and presenting large amounts of factual materials, etc., plus a module on several of the most frequently used report formats. For both sets of modules, we'd also like to set up a referral system so that when engineering faculty members read reports written by their students, they can locate the module needed by the student before he revises and refer the student to the lab.

For the foreign students who come to the lab, most of the instruction, of course, has to be in tutorial sessions, but it seems that they could have even more help if we also had self-instruction modules available for them which review and offer drill in the most common ESL errors, e.g., verb tenses, articles, prepositions, etc. A preliminary survey indicates that we probably will want a set of

twelve modules on these points of grammar and another set of twelve programs of self-monitoring oral and written drills designed to improve pronunciation and comprehension of English. These could be used both as supplements to ESL courses and for foreign students who come to the lab on their own.

Our questions, at this point, are the following:
1. Do you think there is a need for such materials?
2. Would you use them in your lab?
3. Would these modules merely duplicate existing materials (and, if so, which ones)?

We would greatly appreciate your comments and suggestions. Please address your responses to: Muriel Harris, Department of English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana 47907.

Muriel Harris
Purdue University

A Note on Lab Layout

Decor is a word that doesn't have any real meaning in the hardcore utilitarian, results-oriented (mastery learning, accountability, etc.) academic world. Or does it? In this brief note I would like to propose that it ought to--even though I myself hide decor under the more authoritative rubric layout.

Picture yourself entering a goodsize room where you must learn under the most intensified conditions, where you (usually alone) will do nothing but learn, carrelbound, perhaps, or with headphones snug around the ears, or facing your own reflection in a computer readout screen. What difference could it possibly make to you what color the walls are painted or whether someone has provided the room with touches of greenery? I contend that it does indeed make a difference, even at the college level; and there are banks of educational researchers to back my contention. Pleasant surroundings can make the learning process itself more pleasant and therefore easier for the typical anxiety-ridden lab student. This is a psychological fait

accompli, with few areas of doubt remaining.

In a previous Writing Lab Newsletter (April 1978), Professor Virginia Stone tells of setting up a lab by--to begin with--knocking down a wall between two classrooms. She writes of eventually adding pictures "hung on a picture rail around three sides of the room, a wallpaper mural of a wooded scene," and "hanging baskets of devil's ivy and planters of ficus trees" (p.5). We lab teachers are in a unique position: while the average faculty member could lose his head (to say nothing of his job) for tampering with the physical plant, some of us have what amounts to carte blanche. Perhaps it is only because the lab or "learning skills center" is so new that we are allowed such liberty; when we become old hat, or when administrators react to the threat of such unchecked freedom, the situation may be quickly reversed. Thus we ought to use now what funds and freedom we have to make our and our students' place of work more decorously attractive. Ivy on the walls of academe is not enough; let's bring it--avoiding the rhus and kudzu varieties-- into the halls, too.
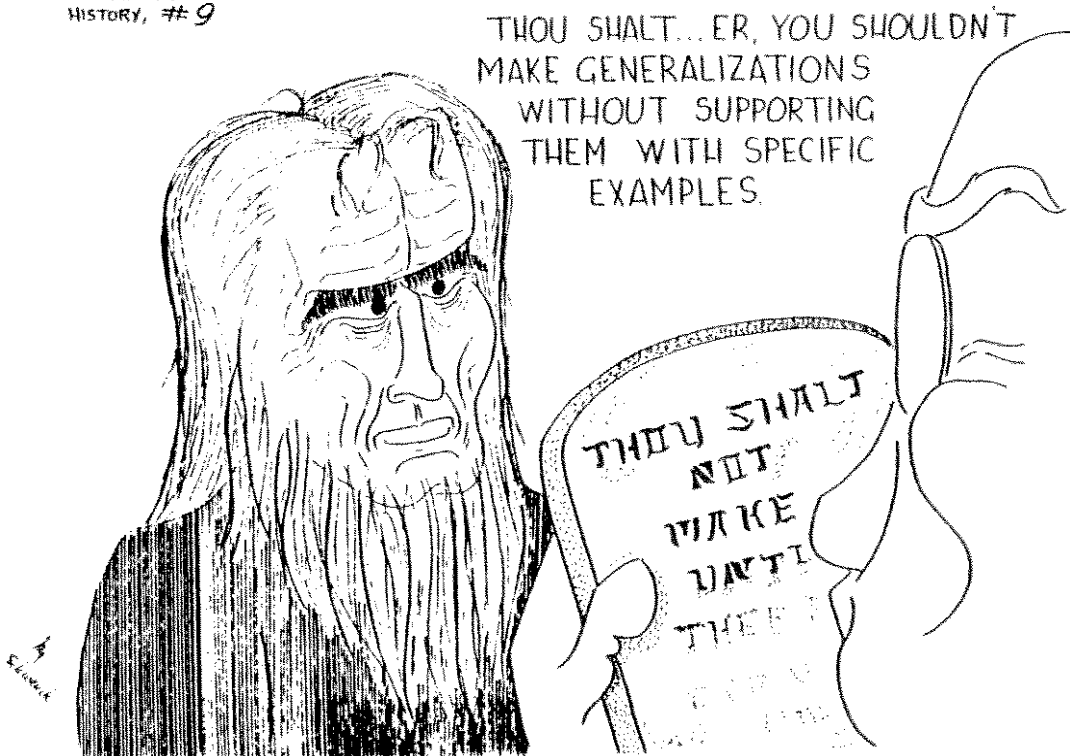
Seriously, one could do worse than to begin with Professor Stone's concept: restful (or at least interesting) pictures on the walls, indoor plants at strategic locations. Wood is a pleasant structural substance to be around; too much of the manmade world is by necessity given over to metal or plastic or, worse, cinder block. Carpeted floors not only soak up sound; they look better, especially in warm dark green or brown. Pastel walls can be tangentially but tangibly conducive to more efficient learning. So, too, can airy open spaces between work-equipment clusters--but now I am lapsing into a more complicated area, best deferred to another time and place (as is, surely, the allied and very debatable subject of Muzak).

If you, lab person, have inherited the shabby back room of gymnasium full of old sox and jocks, my heart goes out to you, as it goes out to those in quonset huts in the upper Snow Belt whose main concern is not layout or decor but simple survival. For the more fortunate among us, those blessed with choices and the money to back them, allow me to enter this plea for the humanization of skills centers with color and flora. These additions can never take the place of learning hardware, of course, but they can help make the use of that equipment more a pleasure than a task.

Richard B. Larsen
Pembroke State University

GREAT MOMENTS
IN WRITING LAB
HISTORY, #9

THOU SHALT...ER, YOU SHOULDN'T MAKE GENERALIZATIONS WITHOUT SUPPORTING THEM WITH SPECIFIC EXAMPLES.

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