WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Vol.4, Number 1(September, 1979)

WARM HELLOS to old friends and welcome to all of our new members who joined us during the summer. Though this month's list of new members is so long that we're forced to print this issue on both sides of every page, I've included the additions because so many of our members continue to write in explaining how useful it is to learn of nearby labs, to note new addresses for old friends, and (in one case) to browse through the lists for suggestions for a name for a new lab.

Though we will continue to include any additional new names each month, a complete directory of WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER members will be sent out in October, a monumental and much appreciated effort undertaken by Myrna Goldenberg (Montgomery College). She will also send out an update in February. Thereafter, copies of the directory will cost \$2. If you have any questions concerning the directory or wish to purchase additional copies, please write directly to Myrna Goldenberg, c/o Department of English, Montgomery College, Rockville, Maryland 20850.

In a forthcoming issue of the newsletter, you will soon find another directory, a compilation of the responses to the questionmaire sent out in June which asked members of our group to indicate whether they are willing to serve as consultants and/or welcome visitors to their labs. Thanks to all who enclosed checks with their questionnaires to help defray the newsletter's duplicating and mailing costs. For those of you who have not recently contributed, donations of \$3 (with checks made payable to me) would be appreciated. Please note that I cannot respond to your Purchasing Office's request for invoices and that I will have to return to you any checks not made out to me. Also, please continue to send your articles and names of new members to:

Muriel Harris, editor WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER Department of English Purdue University West Lafayette, IN 47907

Report of the 1979 CCCC Special Interest Session Discussion Group on Expanded Uses of the Lab.

George Hayhoe told of the lab's services in training T.A.'s at Va. Polytech and State University and of conducting interdisciplinary programs and sessions for engineers, equipping them to be better writers. Much material benefit results from these services as well as good will through public relations.

Ann Sporborg dealt mainly with Emanuel County Junior College's role in helping students to pass Georgia's mandated competency examination. In this case, the lab serves as a model to fulfill a vital, immediate need. Here the lab gains visibility as an expedient remedy for a statewide problem. It is a trailblazer in the search for a solution to the problem of how to prepare students for the examination as well as how to deal with failures of the examination.

Helen Naugle briefly sketched the expanded services of Ga. Tech's lab, which include remedial one-on-one assistance. Ga. Tech's lab also fills a niche in the state's compulsory examination program. It provides a file of former examination topics with samples of passing and failing papers; copies of the examination; criteria used by graders, etc.; and assistance with trial exams. Perhaps the most loudly acclaimed function is the workshop the lab sponsors before each examination session, resulting in dramatic reduction in failures on the exam.

The lab's services are not limited to matters of remediation and composition. They encompass vocabulary building, reading interpretation of literature (all genres), business and technical writing, including the immediate need for writing resumes and letters of application and acceptance. Even creative writing is fostered in the lab. It also serves as a sort of library, providing recordings of famous speeches for speech classes as well as students' speech recordings, records of Chaucer to help students pronounce Middle English, records of dramas and poems for listening enjoyment and classroom enrichment.

These presentations reveal that labs may extend their services into various areas and to all segments of the student body-minorities and handicapped and accelerated, average, and underachieving students of all departments and class rankings.

> Helen Naugle Georgia Tech

I would like to call the following information to your attention:

1) Because we firmly believe that Del Mar College now has one of the finest community college lab facilities and programs in its English Learning Center, we have begun a consulting service for secondary schools and colleges interested in creating or expanding a writing lab. In our region, the service has already met with considerable success. We want to encourage use of this service, as well as on-campus visits to Del Mar, by interested parties.

2) By fall we should have an A-V program available which shows our facility and describes some of our services. We will mail it upon request by interested parties. Please write c/o Department of English, Del Mar College, Corpus Christi, Texas 78404.

3) Dr. Virginia Stone, Mr. Milton Hawkins and I will have a text on the market by January, 1980, if not before. Entitled <u>The English Learning Center</u>, it makes available in book form our lab procedure for sentencelevel instruction. The book is being directed at both secondary and college levels. It includes diagnostic tests at three levels, review notes, progress charts, trial and proficiency tests, a student record, and a teacher's manual with applications of the text, along with diagnostic and proficiency charts.

> Marc Nigliazzo, Director The English Learning Center Del Mar College

THE EVOLUTION OF A WRITING CENTER

Four years ago, the Department of English and Philosophy at Montgomery College-Rockville (an open admission urban community college) opened the Writing Center, created and staffed to help freshman composition students. There had been little time to develop a plan for the Center, but money was allocated to purchase instructional materials, cassette players, and carrels. The faculty planned the Center's tutoring program, assuming that students who needed help would flock to the Writing Center much the same as students who need help seek their instructors during office hours. While there was recognition that the current generation of students often needed help in acquiring basic skills, there was little awareness of the problems of motivating this student, or the best methods of teaching a mature, experienced person the fundamentals of simple written communication, or of breaking the cycle of failure this type of student usually experiences. The evolution of the Rockville Writing Center into an effective, pleasant learning environment reflects the process of educating both the faculty and the students. It is safe to say that the faculty could not have anticipated and, therefore, planned for the challenges they faced, and it is equally safe to say that the students would not have been attracted--at the outset--to the Writing Center as it exists today.

Initially, the Center was spacious, wellequipped with various commercial instructional programs, and well-staffed with faculty ready to tutor students. The essential component was missing--hordes of students did not come to seek the help the faculty knew they needed. Actually, some students did come, but not in substantial numbers and not necessarily from freshman composition sections. Instead, international students and native developmental students enjoyed the privacy and independence provided by the Center's commercial programs in phonics and basic vocabulary and used the Center to help fulfill their course requirement of 30 lab hours per semester. Their presence suggested to the faculty that motivation, whether inner or outer directed, and individualized instructional programs were essential to the success of the Center--success, that is, in fulfilling the stated goal of support for the floundering freshman English student.

Over the next two years, the Department refined its goals and programs, retaining the original goal as the primary goal, but add-

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ing others: once the needs of the composition students were met, the Center planned to develop programs to reinforce other Department courses and eventually to reach out to meet the writing needs of students enrolled in other departments. The Writing Center staff saw this plan as moving outwards through a series of concentric circles and, at the same time, acknowledged the dynamic quality within each circle.

To fulfill the primary goal, the Writing Center staff (Department faculty who volunteered to work in the Center as part of their teaching load) enlisted the aid of the freshman composition instructors to "advertise" the services of the Center through oral and written referrals. The staff used the referral forms to plan tutoring sessions; students who "dropped-in" without referral forms wrote short paragraphs which the tutors used to identify problems and plan subsequent tutoring sessions. At this stage, most of the tutors' work was in diagnosing writing weaknesses and assigning study units--usually commercial self-paced, programmed units. Although the staff did tutor on a one-to-one basis, most of the students (perhaps out of habit) worked on self-paced programs which required multiple choice or one word answers. When student writing did not measurably improve, the staff agreed that the students needed more experience in writing, in actually composing clear, coherent, correct sentences and paragraphs.

After much discussion and brainstorming, the Writing Center staff adopted a more vigorous and aggressive approach. They noticed that composition students were reluctant to ask for help and even hesitant to accept help when it was offered. In contrast, "developmental" students were not only less reticent but also somewhat demanding. The staff concluded that composition students felt stigmatized by having to come to the Center while "developmental" students, by virtue of already being enrolled in remedial classes, accepted their status and were motivated to rise above it. Again, the Center staff regrouped and, this time, to change the Center's image, "blitzed" the Campus with attractive flyers and other promotional material about the Writing Center. In addition, Department faculty prepared instructional modules that required a tutor's involvement and that responded directly to the composition students' writing weaknesses. Each module presented a specific writing skill, illustrated the skill through

numerous examples, and included increasingly difficult exercises to reinforce the skill; the student demonstrated mastery of the skill by writing a paragraph that incorporated that particular skill. Because the exercises and paragraphs demanded student writing and, therefore, tutor correcting, they were far more effective than the commercial program; and because they required tutor-student interaction, they broke the earlier passive pattern of the students ' visits.

The Center faculty also developed a two hour Writing Center course on the sentence as a corequisite to freshman composition for those students whose placement test scores and writing samples were poor. The format of the course was flexible, but generally ten students met for one hour with a tutor to work on syntax and in the second hour on individual assignments given by the tutor.

To fulfill the other goals, the Writing Center staff introduced another program, the workshop. Center use increased dramatically and broadened through these workshops--one hour sessions on a writing problem or a writing-related area. These drop-in workshops, on topics such as essay exam writing or research techniques, attracted students who had never before been in the Center and who were not necessarily poor students. By this time, the Center had lost its stigma and gained genuine vitality.

Today, among the fifty students during any one hour are international, American, "developmental," average, young, mature, handicapped, science, music, economics, or any other type of student. Even the gifted student who wants to browse through the bookshelves or improve his or her vocabulary or write a critique of Renaissance art comes to the Center. During any one hour, 3 faculty tutors may be holding small group tutoring sessions, 2 student tutors may be working individually with students, a workshop may be going on, and 10-20 students may be working independently. Students visit the Center because they are referred by faculty, self-motivated, or simply curious and because they trust the Center to live up to its reputation of providing help and assurance.

During the evolution of the Center, virtually all of the programs were reviewed and revised. The "developmental" students now work on a controlled composition course and on the commercial programs to fulfill their lab re-

quirement; the sentence course meets three hours a week and is more structured than it had been; the staff use one-to-one tutoring and small group instruction; the instructional materials, both commercial and in-house (texts, audio-visuals, modules, and handouts) have been classified into a cross-referenced bibliography; peer tutoring supplements faculty tutoring; even the carrels have been rearranged to form several small tutoring areas.

The staff began developing programs to meet the needs of other departments, for example, style sheets for individual faculty's term papers and reading workshops using texts from the various academic disciplines. Faculty from colleges in neighboring counties and states often visit the Center to learn from our mistakes and successes and to exchange information. Research projects on the effectiveness of various Center teaching techniques and diagnostic tests are ongoing; the Center is evaluating its influence against objective criteria such as student retention and EN101 grades. A professional library on the teaching of writing is growing. In short, the Writing Center evolved into a learning center for students and faculty alike.

The Writing Center programs have become complex and the systems of record keeping and accountability have reflected that complexity and growth. The successes the Center has had, though, are not measured by the numbers of students or programs but rather by the effects of those programs on the students' work and attitude. The Writing Center developed in proportion to the staff's awareness of students' needs -- academic and affective--and in the responses to those needs. The staff developed and implemented limited, clearly defined goal-oriented programs designed to meet both types of needs. The Writing Center will continue to grow by modifying its programs to meet the challenges presented by a dynamic, heterogeneous student population.



Myrna Goldenberg Montgomery College

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Tutoring Manual Available

"Critical Issues in Tutoring," a manual on tutoring that was an outgrowth of the NETWORKS conference on tutoring is available from Barbara Schaier, Research Associate, NETWORKS, Bronx Community College, Bronx, New York 10453.

Co-ordinating the Writing Lab with the Composition Program

One of the most challenging tasks facing a writing lab director in a community college, four year college, or university is the coordination of lab services with the freshman composition program so that the lab can meet the needs of the students and aid the instructors effectively. Many times, the lab tends to remain a separate entity, a "last resort" service to which only those students considered writing cripples are referred. An aura of detention prevents the more competent writers from using the lab facilities and often causes instructors to view the lab as a place to send only those students who cannot be adequately helped through regular class attendance and brief conferences. Frequently, there is little communication between lab workers and classroom instructors, and consequently many problem writers consider lab and composition class as different and unrelated courses. They cannot, therefore, effectively apply skills learned in the lab to their formal assignments. Also, many composition students and instructors consider the lab as a storeroom for gadgets and gimmicks, such as audio-visual devices and programmed texts, which they basically mistrust as tools for serious learning. Yet if the lab director designs programs to work in tandem with the freshman composition curriculum, maintains close communications with the composition instructors, and dispels prejudices concerning writing lab use, the lab can play a vital role in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the freshman composition program.

Usually the first job of the lab director is to devise a diagnostic test which can be used to identify weaknesses in sentence structure and mechanics that the students bring with them to college. The options are to devise an original test or to use one of the very reliable standardized tests issued by national testing services. Whatever technique the lab director prefers, the goal is to have at hand a thorough test that will accurately indicate student problems with grammar and mechanics and an efficient test that can be administered easily and quickly. The typical areas tested are those basic to student writing skills: subject-verb agreement, pronoun reference and case, sentence style, fused and run-on sentences, sequence of verb tenses, dangling and misplaced modi-

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fiers, parallel structure, faulty comparisons, word distinctions, and fragmented sentences. The most effective diagnostic tests generally operate on the same principle as English sections in such tests as the LSAT and the GRE and as tests of written English developed by national testing services and publishing houses handling grammar tests: they ask students to recognize and identify structure errors as they appear in specially contrived test items. Usually, because of the problems in test length it would cause and the cumbersome grading process it would entail, the rewriting of the sentences into correct form cannot be required of the students.

In the normal daily workings of the lab, students who are doing lab work for course credit, if such an opportunity exists, or who are, through either choice or referral, working to improve their basic writing skills take the diagnostic test as a first step. They then work through programmed texts, reading the appropriate units and doing assigned practice exercises in order to review their areas of weakness in basic skills which were indicated by the diagnostic test. They take mastery tests over these areas when they feel confident about the material to demonstrate their efficiency. For those students without serious problems who need principally to review grammar and punctuation rules, the programmed texts with their reliance on selfpacing and immediate feedback are usually a sufficient source of information. But for other students for whom the material might be new and difficult, the other valuable lab resource--individualized instruction--can also be used. Lab instructors can direct these students to specialized programmed materials which would be more applicable to their levels of ability. That these are specialized materials need not be emphasized to the students of course. Also, if they feel it necessary, the instructors can work through these texts with the students. Probably they will go over the students' exercise work carefully, supplementing text explanations with their own.

Serving freshman composition students is in some ways a task different from that of serving these other types of lab students; the freshman composition students must concentrate on producing well-written themes as well as improving their knowledge of grammar and punctuation rules. With this additional goal in mind, those teachers responsible for implementing the coordination of lab services with

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the freshman composition program are faced with two basic alternatives. They can administer the diagnostic test the first week of classes to all freshman students in their composition classes and require that the students work through their areas of weakness in the lab during the quarter, passing the appropriate mastery tests constituting part of the course requirements. Or they can issue referral slips to all freshman instructors so that they can refer students to lab for work in the areas of grammatical and mechcanical weaknesses indicated by their themes throughout the quarter.

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The first alternative seems to separate the study of grammar and punctuation rules from the writing process itself, a dangerous effect since the point of lab work is the student's writing improvement. The second alternative makes the connection between composition and lab assignments clear to the student and allows the student to use rules learned in the lab to correct errors marked on the paper. But often such a referral process is difficult to implement uniformly and, in consequence, will not be as thorough as the blanket testing technique which makes the same demand of all freshman. students. In order to offset the disadvantages that accompany both of these approaches, a combination of their requirements seems necessary. And this combination should, I think, retain a reliance on the universally-administered diagnostic test while insuring an effective alignment of lab work with composition assignments by using the referral system as well.

The student's taking the diagnostic test during the first week of class and working through the areas of weakness in sentence structure and mechanics indicated certainly does not necessarily insure writing improvement. Those lab directors who endorse the diagnostic testing procedure as a panacea for all writing ills will probably find their credibility sadly undercut. A student's ability to recognize and correct dangling modifiers in the contrived items on a mastery test, for example, does not aid him directly in his quest for a solid thesis or well-developed paragraphs. But the diagnostic testing procedure is valuable in that it efficiently evaluates the student's performance levels in those most concrete of writing skills components--grammar and punctuation--and provides a clear process for the student to follow in mastering

his problem areas. Instead of the typical hit-or-miss method in which the student sees for the first time such terms as comma splice and misplaced modifier when they are slashed without explanation across his paper and is only haphazardly motivated to find out what they mean, the diagnostic testing procedure introduces the student to such terms at the start of the quarter or semester in a systematic way according to his test results. He is given the motivation to explore and master the problem areas--mastery is required. And he is given the means-the lab provides resource books, practice exercises, mastery tests, and individualized help.

The diagnostic test is a beneficial tool then, but there is still the danger that the student will have difficulty in transferring the rules he learns in the lab setting to his class writing. For this reason, the lab director should ideally use the referral system, with either a formal or informal emphasis, along with the diagnostic testing process. Formally, official slips can be issued to each freshman composition instructor so that he can note recurrent errors in the student's writing, indicating to the lab workers what areas the student must review and rework. The referral slip would be returned to the instructor when the student completes the assignment. Also, with the student's themes available, the lab workers can help him use the rules he reviewed to correct specific errors on his papers and insure correlation between lab work and actual class assignments. A more informal referral process would have the instructor just suggesting to the student that he take his paper to the lab, perhaps indicating in the end comment on the paper what areas he should review. The instructor could also ask the student simply to have an assistant look over his paper with him and leave the suggestion of specific review work to the lab instructor. This informal technique does not get the student to the lab or feedback back to the instructor as surely as the use of the formal referral methods; it leaves the responsibility on the shoulders of the student and demands interest and initiative on his part.

In using either referral system, a lab director provides a valuable supplement to the diagnostic testing procedure. The fact that the student does not always instantly retain rules he learns in lab or elsewhere and might need continued work and review in weak areas is allowed for; and, again, that elusive

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connection between the student's learning rules and his improving his overall writing skills is implemented as well. The use of the referral method also makes even more obvious the necessity for the classroom instructor and the lab workers to remain in close contact. In order to operate effectively, the classroom teacher must know if the student is working through the grammar units he needs. and the lab instructor must know if the student's mastering these units is helping him eliminate errors in his writing. This tandem work between the lab and classroom instructors, combined with the diagnostic testing procedure and made possible particularly through the referral system, can provide composition instructors with two major benefits: they can make more extensive demands for grammar proficiency in student writing, and they can devote more class time to writing concerns other than the basic skills areas.

When they are allotting class time, composition instructors all too often find grammar and punctuation problematic areas. If the students seem to be having excessive and continous difficulties with basic skills, as is frequently the case, a tendency is for the instructor to deal with their problems during class before proceeding to more sophisticated writing concerns. The result, however, is that many times there is a sacrifice of some areas of style and rhetorical logic that ideally should be included in the composition curriculum for college-level writers. Another tendency is for the instructor to insist that college writers should not have basic skills problems or that if they do they should be able to correct them on their own, using a handbook. These instructors, therefore, tend to omit any discussion of basic skills problems from their class activities. The conviction that college students should be able to refer to a handbook and correct their errors independently is understandable but not always practical. In my experience. many students have difficulty understanding the technical language used in most handbooks' usually complex sample sentences to their own writing errors. But by coordinating lab services with their class activities, the instructors can avoid paying either too much or too little attention to basic skills problems. Since the students have taken the diagnostic test and are working through their areas of weakness, the instructors can be assured that basic skills problems are being dealt with without their having to allot ex-

tensive class time. And if problems persist, they are able to refer the students to the lab for additional and more individualized help. This is a valuable option in that it helps the retention of slower students who do have the potential to become competent writers if they are given special attention.

As I have noted, the freshman composition student differs from the student who wants only to review rules in grammar and mechanics. The composition student must produce acceptable essays as well as master basic skills. The diagnostic testing process and the referrals for additional work help the student improve the calibre of his writing in that he gradually learns to recognize and avoid errors in sentence structure and punctuation that he might have made previously. But they do not help the student in other areas of writing skills, particularly organizational and stylistic concerns. To some lab directors, such concerns might be seen as the province of the classroom teacher and rightly so. But there are ways in which the lab can serve this facet of the freshman curriculum as well.

The lab director can, for instance, make worthwhile rhetoric texts and readers readily known and available to the freshman composition students. The freshmen can use the books to supplement information given in their classes on organizational patterns and techniques, and they can benefit from the excellent sample essays provided. The lab staff can refer students to specific sections in these books that deal with special topics such as paragraph development and transitional devices. Frequently, exercises accompany these sections which the students can cover with help from the lab instructors if necessary. The lab director might also choose to work with the lab staff to develop the lab's own units on such topics as the steps in organizing a paper around a thesis sentence, or ways to produce good transitions and well-developed paragraphs. After close work with a variety of students over a period of time, the lab staff is aware of the students' specific needs and many times is able to devise units which will be more directly applicable to the types of class assignments with which the students are dealing. And because they are involved in developing these materials, lab instructors are able to use them more surely and effectively in bringing about writing improvement.

call for the student to work through the materials himself, asking for individual help only if he feels he needs it. Another approach is for the class instructor to refer the student to lab to work solely on an individualized basis with a lab instructor in order to correct organizational and/or stylistic difficulties. The instructor can note in the end comment on the student's theme what problems should be covered, and, of course, the lab worker will recognize weaknesses in logical thought progression and sentence variety as he reads through the paper with the student. Again, this referral process enables the student to apply lab instruction to his own class writing. And if the lab instructor feels that the student will benefit from reviewing certain text or lab units, these would still be directly related to his class work.

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Then too, the classroom instructors can take the initiative in using lab services to supplement class activities beyond just referring students to lab for specific work. They can make their class assignments clear to the lab staff, providing lab instructors with the details of what is expected of the students as well as copies of assignment sheets and other materials being used in class. This kind of interaction means that there will be less confusion on the part of the lab workers when they are advising students concerning class assignments. The class instructor can also take advantage of the individualized instruction which the lab provides by allowing students to work on class exercises or assignments within the confines of the lab so that they can ask questions as problems arise and receive immediate professional help.

The writing lab can, therefore, prove a vital part of the freshman composition program, serving not only the writers with serious problems but all writing students. Because it provides both self-paced programs and individualized instruction, the lab is a flexible service which can be adapted to the particular needs of the individual instructors and students. It is up to the lab director to communicate with the freshman composition instructors and to begin devising and implementing ways to tap the rich resources which the lab concept makes available to them.

Toni Lopez University of Florida

Most of the techniques I have mentioned

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