WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Vol. IV, No. 2 (October, 1979)

A potentially useful suggestion from one of our new members is that the newsletter ought to include a "question and answer" column. If you have questions for which you'd like responses from other readers, please send them to me along with names of new members, articles for the newsletter, and donations of $3 (with checks made payable to me):

Muriel Harris, editor
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Report of the 1979 Special Interest Session Discussion Group on Serving ESL Students in the Writing Lab

This group briefly discussed two methods of diagnosing the writing problems of students of English as a second language, considered a categorization of ESL student writing skills as well as a contrast between the native student and the ESL student, and then shared ideas about materials which are particularly useful.

After an introduction to the session, Kathleen Yancey summarized a method for diagnosis through a sample of student writing. She suggested that care be taken to ensure that the student is writing in English, not translating from his native language. She also advised the group that three sorts of writing assignments seem to be best for collecting writing samples from ESL students: writing a process paragraph or essay, writing about a personal experience, or writing about anything familiar (such as their native countries). She then showed the group a method for scoring the sample by making a frequency count of errors, and for this demonstration she provided three actual samples of ESL writing.

Following this demonstration Yancey discussed a method for devising an individualized study plan based on the diagnosis and then led a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of diagnosis through writing samples. Specifically cited as advantages were the face validity of the process as well as the opportunity it provides for becoming acquainted with the student. Disadvantages included the time consumed by the process as well as the limited number of strengths and weaknesses the student is able to demonstrate.

The discussion then turned to a consideration of the potential for diagnosing control of specific structural features of English through the use of sentence combining. Jon Jonz lead this portion of the discussion and focused attention on some principles to follow in using directive sentence combining as a testing devise. He suggested that the vocabulary of the test items be controlled so that the test could more clearly be one of syntax than one of lexical items. He said that the test should ideally be done on a one-to-one basis, and that the task should be introduced and practiced orally first. Finally, he advised the group to have a bank of several items for each structure to be tested and to work to assure that the items taken together formed a context of some sort.

After distributing a sampling of items which could be used to test coordination, subordination, relativization, and infinitive structures, Jonz then suggested that the results of the diagnosis could be used to direct students to appropriate handouts, texts, tapes, or other materials for practice.

Yancey then moved the discussion in the direction of categorizing student skills. She offered a grouping of "linguistic" problems and "process" problems into "low", "middle", and "high" ranges, and she made the point that although these groupings were rough and tentative, they did provide the lab instructor with some idea of what to expect. Jonz suggested that a contrast exists between ESL and native students in that quite frequently ESL students show more gain from tackling "linguistic" problems before "process" problems whereas the reverse often holds for native students. Further contrasts involving motivation and social factors were very briefly discussed, and lists of useful materials were examined.

Though the session was very rushed, the twenty or so participants agreed that even without specialized training in ESL methods, the experienced lab instructor has at hand many of the tools necessary for dealing with students whose native language is not English. It was suggested that groups at future CCCC's again be formed to discuss the needs of ESL students.

Discussion Leaders:

Jon Jonz (East Texas State University
Kathleen Yancey (Purdue University)

JOURNAL OF DEVELOPMENTAL AND REMEDIAL EDUCATION

The number of students who are not fully prepared to succeed in the programs of post-secondary institutions is growing. A new publication--the JOURNAL OF DEVELOPMENTAL & REMEDIAL EDUCATION--is specifically designed for the educator or administrator concerned with meeting the needs of these underprepared students.

The JOURNAL addresses the academic, emotional and social needs of the underprepared student. It will keep you, as a professional educator, abreast of current theory and practices, methods, and materials for high-risk students, upcoming workshops and conferences, plus more. If you are not presently aware of the nationwide efforts to assist underprepared students, the JOURNAL will demonstrate the scope of these activities in both two and four-year institutions.

The JOURNAL OF DEVELOPMENTAL & REMEDIAL EDUCATION is published three times a year--Fall, Winter and Spring. Subscription prices are $7.50 for individuals and $10.00 for institutions. You may subscribe by writing to JOURNAL OF DEVELOPMENTAL & REMEDIAL EDUCATION, D.D. Dougherty Library, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina 28608.

Dealing With Criticism

Students who come to the Writing Center at Berkeley often misconstrue the criticism teachers give their writing as "angry." They perceive criticism as condemnation, censor, or worse, and their anxiety keeps them from seeing how they might benefit from the instructor's comments. Even the more experienced writers may retreat when presented with a generous outpouring of critical marginalia from a well-meaning, conscientious teacher. Yet, writers must learn to confront a reader's response if they are to improve. Learning to write is learning what to do with criticism. Professional writers know that soliciting and profiting from reader response can be an important step in the revision process.

At the Writing Center we have found that students become more open to criticism if they learn what it's like to give it. This kind of training in critical response can be done very effectively by having peers discuss each other's writing in small groups of five to eight (see my monograph Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing. NCTE/ERIC, 1976.) It is extremely important, however, that the criticism be highly structured, lest it deteriorate into mindless backpatting or brickbatting. The group leader must provide a framework for intellectual cooperation and unfettered inquiry. I enthusiastically recommend the model outlined below. I used it with positive results in Spring, 1979, for a group of six intermediate to advanced writers, freshman to seniors, who were working on various writing projects including fiction, poetry, essays, and reportage. The model serves well for all genres. Using this model we found that we could give thorough feedback to two authors within an hour's time. It is more efficient if the participants have had a chance to read the pieces in advance.

A MODEL FOR READER RESPONSE

Based on Kenneth Bruffee's "The Brooklyn Plan"

Introduction: Before we begin our response we must know something of the author's purpose. What is the audience for this piece? What is the author trying to do? Then before beginning the process outlined below, the author should read the piece aloud while we follow along in our copies. The following four stages of response are designed to answer these questions:

1. What form does it take?
2. How well is it written?
3. What does it have to say?
4. How well have we responded?

I. Objectively describe the rhetorical substance without passing judgement.
Is there a form here? What does each part do? How do the parts create a movement? A tension? What is the message or intent of this piece? What does it seem to be saying? How does the overall structure support the intent?

II. Evaluate (judge) the writing technique, paying particular attention to the unity, coherence, organization, development, stylistic clarity and imagery, and mechanics. Be honest, thorough, and respectful. Remember that you hope other critics will put just as much effort and concern into responding to your work, so try to be as helpful and useful as possible.

A. First, state what you see as strengths, not merely to compliment or comfort the author but to make sure that the author knows what he/she is doing well, so as to be able to continue doing it.

B. Second, state what you think the author should do to improve the work: not what you think is "wrong," but what the author should do that is not done now, what he/she should stop doing, and what should be done differently.

Work at giving tactful, sympathetic criticism, both positive and negative, but be demanding enough to help the author improve.

III. Evaluate the content.
Is this a subject, form, or issue that you can get involved in? Are you entertained, piqued, or bored? Do you agree or disagree with the author's point of view? Has the author done justice to the subject?

IV. Interact with the author and other critics.

A. Author Response
What do you think you might change in light of the criticism you have just received? What is your evaluation of the criticism you've received?

B. Critics' response to each other
Evaluate some of the criticism you've just heard. Do you think there are any misunderstandings? If there is disagreement between the author and a critic, is there anything you can say to help resolve the issue? Has any response been too harsh, too picky, too uncritically approving?

NOTE: We are learning not only how to improve our own writing from the criticism we receive, but also how to improve the criticism we give others. Therefore, all respondents should be given a copy of an author's final draft in order to see the effect of any revisions.

This model is basically a condensed version of Kenneth Bruffee's course for training peer tutors at Brooklyn College. A detailed description of the course and its intellectual benefits for student writers can be found in Bruffee's article, "The Brooklyn Plan: Attaining Intellectual Growth through Peer-Group Tutoring: (Liberal Education, 64: 447-468). I am grateful to Ken for his permission to publish this abbreviated form of his model. There will be a complete course description of how Ken uses peer criticism for training peer tutors in the forthcoming (February, 1980) second edition of his text, A Short Course in Writing (Cambridge, Mass: Winthrop Publishers).

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The Case for Faculty Workshops

The circulation growth of the Writing Lab Newsletter is testimony to both the popularity and the validity of this individualized approach to teaching writing. At some schools, like the University of Wisconsin, the lab has replaced the traditional freshman composition course; at many other schools, like Michigan Tech--where I direct the composition program--the lab has become an important complement to the composition course. For many students, the lab is the best opportunity to obtain all important one-on-one instruction in writing, where there is time to explore each student's unique problems. As Muriel Harris writes in College English (Nov. 1978), the lab tutor at his or her best is also a writing counselor, able to take into account "the students' motivation, possible sources for present difficulties, attitudes, interests, reservations about the situations they find themselves in, and time constraints . . ."

A third and related idea to help improve student writing competency is currently gaining favor at a number of major schools. James Britton uses the term "writing across the curriculum" to describe this movement designed to encourage teachers from all disciplines to incorporate writing into their classrooms (The Development of Writing Abilities 11-18, 1975). Related to Daniel Fader's idea of "English in every classroom" (Hooked on Books, 1966) is Britton's argument that only when all teachers understand the value of writing as a learning, exploring activity will they begin to use it for more than testing and measuring--and consequently teach students to value it as a unique, essential aid to learning and thinking. The theme for the 1979 Conference on College Composition and Communication was "Writing: A Cross-Disciplinary Enterprise," a restatement of the same idea. Neither composition teacher nor lab tutor alone is likely to bring about a permanent change in student writing behavior unless that change is reinforced periodically throughout the students' four years in the university and in disciplines other than English. Without such reinforcement, the skills acquired in comp class or writing lab atrophy and disappear--at best, they get "soft" from lack of exercise.

The most visible program to emerge as a result of the "writing across the curriculum" movement is the faculty workshop on writing. Assumption College (MA) and The University of Oregon are pioneers in this area, Beaver College (PA) and West Chester State College (PA) have received major NEH grants to pursue interdisciplinary programs. The faculty workshop exposes teachers from disciplines other than English to writing ideas and techniques useful in teaching history, biology, math, chemistry, etc. Implemented effectively, faculty workshops provide the context which makes writing instruction more real for students in both comp classes and labs.

At Michigan Tech we have developed the faculty workshop as a regular and ongoing part of our whole approach to teaching writing; it provides the framework to give lasting support to whatever writing instruction students formally receive in English class and Language Lab. The faculty workshop expands the awareness of teachers in every discipline to help them view writing as a "process;" teachers can then make more intelligent use of writing by using such methods as peer group criticism, multiple-draft paper assignments and student journals. They also know more about which students need referral in the lab and which might be helped by some other means.

Since October, 1977, Michigan Tech has conducted three formal 2-day "Faculty Institutes" to discuss writing across the curriculum; forty-two faculty members, representing almost every discipline at M.T.U., have taken part. Evaluation of the workshops has been

positive and, in December 1978, the General Motors Foundation awarded Tech a grant for $225,000 to continue the work of the Institutes over the next five years. We encourage lab directors to consider writing across the curriculum workshops as important complements to their lab programs. Following is a reproduction of the program outline we used in October, 1978; it serves as both a syllabus for the workshop and a document to recruit faculty from other disciplines. For further information contact Toby Fulwiler (906-487-2066).

Program Objectives:

The Institute theme is teaching writing in the university, with particular focus on strategies to improve student writing in all academic disciplines, from engineering and science to the liberal arts. Faculty members who attend this Institute will spend two days discussing writing, participating in small group writing exercises, and critically examining concepts which are the theoretical foundation for these activities. Following is a summary of Institute objectives.

1. To explore writing as a learning activity, different from reading, speaking and listening.

2. To discuss the principles of good writing appropriate to a university community.

3. To learn specific strategies for incorporating writing frequently and regularly in any discipline.

4. To create an atmosphere of common understanding among M.T.U. faculty members regarding communication in general and student writing in particular.

5. To generate new methods for implementing writing across the curriculum at Michigan.

Schedule of Events

I. "A Survey of Writing at Michigan Tech" --writing problems encountered by professors in different disciplines; conceptions and misconceptions about academic writing.

II. "Evaluating Student Papers"--exercises using student writing samples submitted by participants.

III. "Writing, Revising, Talking"--an exercise in which faculty are asked to write and revise, then critique each other's work in a non-judgmental format.

IV. "Writing across the Curriculum"--a discussion of James Britton's categories of writing: expressive, poetic and transactional.

V. "Writing Workshops"--writing problems peculiar to specific disciplines: 1) the liberal arts, 2) science, 3) technical fields.

VI. "Journal Writing across the Curriculum"--a program for incorporating expressive writing in every discipline.

VII. "The Writing Process"--exercises in peer-group critiques and multiple draft papers.

VIII. "The M.T.U. Language Laboratory: Concept and Use"--a demonstration of materials from Fisher Hall lab, including tapes and sample exercises.

IX. "Evaluation and Reconsideration"--discussion by participants about incorporating writing across the M.T.U. curriculum; institute evaluation.

Tobi Fulwiler
Michigan Technological University

IMPROVING STUDENT LEARNING SKILLS, by Martha Maxwell (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979, xx+518 pp.), reviewed by Muriel Harris

This new book by Martha Maxwell, who developed and administered the Student Learning Center on the Berkeley campus of the University of California, is a much welcomed introductory handbook on setting up a learning skills center and initiating a tutoring program. For those who must confront the need to plan a budget, a staff, realistic goals, record keeping systems, evaluation procedures, and other crucial nuts and bolts aspects of learning skills centers, this book will be a valuable introduction.

For those who have already plunged in and are actively engaged in administering their centers, the book offers some plain talk on

the realities of learning support services, e.g., how to woo support from the rest of the faculty, how to broaden the services of the center beyond "serving the victims of poor teaching, unrealistically difficult examinations, and unreasonable faculty expectations," and how to locate the center in the university or college's hierarchy so that it can function effectively. Equally realistic is the discussion of the tenure problems that confront the director, the lack of academic training for learning center administrators, and the need to move beyond merely counting every body that comes in the door as an evaluation procedure.

Other sections of the book skim lightly over subjects such as the history of the problem of the underprepared student in higher education and the failure of remedial programs and basic skills courses to meet the needs of these students. One section of the book is a brief overview of some possible solutions for students who lack competency in reading, writing, studying, mathematics, and science. But with so much ground to cover, little can be said about each (for example, writing labs are lumped with peer tutoring and given only one page in the chapter on writing skills.). However, the forty pages of references at the end are a valuable resource list for delving further into most of the subjects discussed in the book. The appendices are even more immediately useful: a list of frequently used tests, job classifications for learning skills counselors, a short list of journals and other sources for developmental skills specialists, and a few types of second language interference for ESL students. Two other appendices, "How to Study Chemistry" and "How to Study Physics" are adapted from booklets written for use in Berkeley's learning center and may be quite useful to students looking for some general hints on how to approach studying these subjects.

In short, Maxwell has produced a very valuable, very useful handbook for learning center people. Fortunately, the book looks well bound because it will also be well-thumbed.

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