

WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

Vol. V, No. 1 (September, 1980)

Warm hellos to old newsletter friends and a hearty welcome to new ones (listed on the last few pages). It's been a long, hot summer for many of us, but fall, cooler breezes, and a flood of new students are upon us.

As we plunge into fresh challenges, it is important that we continue to exchange ideas, trade suggestions, and offer each other useful bits of information. I look forward to hearing from you and to receiving your articles, announcements, names of new members, and donations of \$3 (with checks made payable to me) to:



Muriel Harris, Editor WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER Dept. of English Purdue University West Lafayette, IN 47907

A brief business note: The newsletter is sent out in ten issues each year, September through June. Back issues of Vol. II, III, and IV are available for \$4/volume. While there is no subscription fee as such for current issues, my department's business office would greatly appreciate a donation of \$3 a year. Since we have no invoices and no means of billing your purchasing offices, we rely on you and your conscience to send in donations. With a present mailing list of about 800 people, the newsletter doesn't break even, but your checks do help to pacify my department's keeper of the budget.

CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENT

The VIII Annual Ohio Developmental Education Conference entitled "Intelligence Can Be Taught!?" will be held November 5-7,1980 at the Carrousel Inn, Cincinnati, Ohio. The keynote speaker will be Arthur Whimbey, author of <u>Intelligence Can Be Taught</u>. For information and registration forms contact Dr. Tanya Ludutsky or Dr. Phyllis Sherwood, Raymond Walters General & Technical College, 9555 Plainfield Road, Cincinnati, Ohio 45236 (513-745-4202). Registration is limited. THE WRITING CENTER -- WHAT IS ITS CENTER?

When I think about the writing center, I often image the process of centering from pottery--where unformed clay is thrown into the wheel, and while the potter sets the wheel in motion, at the same time, with steady, gentle hands, he holds, forms, and shapes the wet clay on the spinning wheel. The act must be done quickly, knowingly and masterfully. Clay that is centered can be formed; clay that is not wobbles about and may in the end fly off the wheel.

Writing centers--like the unformed clay-have been thrown onto the already spinning wheels of the college and university, thrown on in a way that fads often are--to respond to the pressures of the moment. We look back but a short decade to chart some of these fads and see how we have moved from being highly curricularized institutions that fell to the call for relevance and now are institutionalizing competency exams and "back to basics." The wheels spin fast, and any of us who tries to shape programs must understand who it is we are and what it is we want in the context of this complex, changing educational community in which we live.

The writing center is in the air--in the college, and increasingly in secondary schools; "basic skills" is in the air; literacy; grants; research; decreasing entrance exams scores; competency exams; articulation; changing student populations -- all this crashing up against our universities and colleges. The pressure to create programs, the speed with which decisions are made, often catches us short. The call to establish a center comes; the idea has caught on; a job opens; and we make a program without centering it within itself or within the institution where it lives. We often become operative without knowing who we are, and once in motion, we find it nearly impossible to discover, because we face day-to-day crises, particularly

of survival and of accountability.

First--survival. Many of us are uncentered, unstable, and vulnerable in our own institutions. We are on the fringe, not knowing where we belong or where we live: in the English department, the skills department, the writing program, the education department, the learning center. We are not certain what administrative umbrella should cover us. We live on the periphery, many without faculty status, without a tenure track position. Our image is often caught up with the most pressing needs within the institution. (In our center at Queens College, first we were associated with CUNY open admissions, now more and more with the growing foreign student population and with the CUNY Writing Assessment Test, and those who have failed it.)

Our budgets and staff are often uncertain; we may rely on discretionary funds from our administration, or on pooling staff from outside sources--like the CETA project--or we may have become part of the present grant writing mania--as our administration asks us to rely on soft money. Our survival then is linked to changing problems, changing staff, and a changing money supply. We are often defined and redefined from without.

At the same time we are often asked to account for ourselves: we are allowed to open and allowed to stay open only if we show that what we are doing is worthwhile, and so in the pressure to show our worth, we may create centers where we can <u>get</u> results--we can show improvement on pretests and posttests when we work with modules on grammar, say. Here we show progress.

Tied to survival and accountability, however, is the larger question of who we are. What do we do? And how do we do it? Who are our students? Who are our tutors? How do we teach them? What do they do? What materials do we use? Do we use machines? What is our approach: tutorial, auto-tutorial, collaborative, individualized? And what about counselor training and programmed instruction, computers, written materials, forms, and which grammar, what skills, and what about psychology, methodology, pedagogy, and philosophy?

Given the pressures from without and the pressures from within to shape something good and solid, what do we have? What do you have? I ask you to think of what the <u>center</u> is in your own tutoring program and to think of how it relates to the institution in which you live.

And if you answer that the center of your program is grammar exercises, counselor training, individualized instruction, or whatever, I ask you to think again, for I believe that we must guard against defining the center narrowly and not recognizing its role, more broadly, in the teaching of writing. I believe that the center of the writing center must be writers and their writing. During the last ten years, we have learned more about writing and the teaching of writing than we have in any other decade: the writing center must reflect what we know, and explore, still, what we need to know. We have come to know that the skill of writing cannot and should not be cut off from the whole process so that as Lil Brannon has . said, "Students' energies should be directed toward the entire composing process rather than to one small area of revision."

We have a chance to bring the best that is thought now about writing into the center. To resort to teaching pieces of the process, disconnected from writing, is to be regressive. When we focus on writers and their writing, everything else falls into place. Let me be specific.

1) Skill building, correctness, grammar, usage, revision, rewriting surely are part of the whole, but they are not the whole.

2) Tutors, their roles, their jobs, their training will work in relation to writing. Tutors first and foremost should be writers themselves and readers of another's writing. They are audience. Since all writers need readers, their function is clear.

3) Psychology, methodology, counselor training, etc., if they can be helpful in our learning how to be better writers and teachers and tutors of writing, yes. Any idea, any conceptual framework from which we can learn, yes, of course.

4) Individualization. We must know what we mean when we say individualization. If it means that the student is to work alone, particularly on exercises, to improve his writing, then we have missed one of the most important functions the writing center can serve: and that is to lead the writer out

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of himself and into communion with others through his language. Students do much of their work and spend much of their time individually; they are usually alone in a relationship with the instructor in the classroom; they are often plugged into their individual radios and stereos, their individual television sets, often their individual programmed instruction. If we believe as Susanne Langer does that "language is the only means of articulating thought, that everything else which is not speakable thought is feeling," then it is our responsibility, our challenge to provide a way for our students to try out their language--to move out of themselves--and into a community of writers, as the writing center can be, particularly in a nonthreatening, accepting atmosphere, where writers can work together. The focus, then, I do not believe should be on the individual per se but on the individual as he is a communicator with his audience. The tutor and tutee can be that pair -- in the collaborative atmosphere of the lab.

It is this sense of a community of writers-as tangible and immeasurable as it is--that I believe is the center of the successful writing center. Where tutors, staff, directors see themselves as writers and become aware of what they do as writers, their attitudes and their respect for writing spill over to their tutees.

If all this is intangible and immeasurable, then how can we prove our worth? How can we show ourselves accountable? I believe that it is up to us to know that writing, learning to write, takes time, that writers as they are improving often slide backwards, that as they take more and more risks, more errors may appear in their writing, that our administrators must know this, that we should not fall into a facile accounting that in the end shows little. And we cannot and should not be the only ones who are accountable. We live in an educational institution that lives in an entire system. We cannot make up, very often, for what has gone on before in the lives and in the education of our students: so should we not fool ourselves into thinking that with a few tutoring sessions we can do so.

We are not isolates; we cannot and should not be. We must be connected to the whole of writing, in our respective departments,

in our college as a whole. We must recognize this broad context in which we define and refine ourselves. And although we are often on the periphery of our institutions, we must work strategically in either one of two ways:

First, we can support a flourishing writing program, in which we have a part, an integral and integrated part. In the best of all possible worlds, we may one day have what Ross Winterowd describes in Contemporary Rhetoric. In summarizing implications of the Dartmouth Conference and linking them to his own notions of what freshman composition should be, Winterowd says that since all "writing equals self expression," the freshman composition course should give students an opportunity to practice that "The problem is, of course, expression. that students may discover their need [for different kinds of writing] after they have passed through freshman English . . . This means, of course, that the English department should staff writing labs, to help students at all levels with writing problems as those problems arise. When students need to write a paper for history-if indeed they ever do -- they can read Turabian, and if that does not suffice, they can come to the writing lab, where they will get help," (Contemporary Rhetoric, p. 17).

In this ideal world, the lab is firmly centered in a particular approach and a commitment to writing. When we do live in this kind of setting, our centering process relates directly to a supportive, defined, clear environment.

Second. If not, if we do not live in such a world, then I believe that it is our responsibility to help create one, to promote change in the ways writing is taught. We at Queens are working now in a program where we provide tutors to help teachers within the New York public high schools to change the ways in which they teach reading and writing. At the beginning of the project, students were graded--numerically, 67, 77, 83, on a first draft: they had one-shot learning. Now, particularly, with the support of tutors and a writing center, students have a second shot. Instead of the 67 or 77 that may be written across the page, there is now one word: "tutor," and an opportunity to work in the writing center. We have a long way to go, but we have begun. Some students have a chance to work in a small group with a tutor and their peers, to read their writing aloud, to hear responses to a draft, and to rewrite.

We cannot allow ourselves to endorse fragmented approaches to the teaching of writing. Just as we cannot look at the function of the writing center, narrowly, we cannot accept it as an isolate, apart from the institution and the system in which it lives. We are part of a larger whole and a larger effort--to effect change in the way in which our students are educated. The opportunity is here--if we accept ourselves as shapers, as potters, who are working, as yet, with uncentered, unformed clay.

> Judith Fishman Queens College - CUNY



Further additions to the list of graduate programs in composition, printed in the May and June issues of the WRITING LAB NEWS-LETTER include the following:

- FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY. Fred L. Standley, Chairman of the Dept. of English, reports that "Florida State University has offered a Rhetoric minor in the Ph.D. program in English for about ten years... A student in the doctoral program may write a dissertation in the field of rhetoric and composition also." In addition, the English Department offers the B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. Degrees with Emphasis in Writing. Students in these programs enroll in literature and/or linguistics courses as well as in writing workshops. Workshops are offered in the writing of poetry, fiction, drama, and rhetoric.
- UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA. Norma B. Kahn, Specializations Director, Reading/Writing/Literature, Graduate School of Education, reports that at the University of Pennsylvania, The Teaching of Writing Specialization is one of four specializations within the Language in Education Division.

- CAFNEGIE-MELLON UNIVERSITY now offers several programs of graduate study in composition and rhetoric: 1) "The Doctor of Arts program. . . offers an alternative to the Ph.D. program for students whose chief interest is teaching and curriculum development rather than research," 2) "The Master's Program in Professional Writing is designed for students who want careers as writers in business and government," 3) "The Ph.D. in Rhetoric is focused on rhetorical theory. . . especially on theoretical explanations of how people produce and understand discourse. It is designed for students who want careers in rhetorical research and the teaching of rhetoric and composition in English departments and interdisciplinary programs," and 4) An Interdisciplinary Doctorate in Document Design, a research and graduate program in writing and document design which is available as an option for students pursuing doctoral degrees in the Departments of English and Psychology.
- VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY. Constance Gefvert reports that "Virginia Tech offers the Master of Arts in English with a 'Writing/Teaching/Language Option.' While a substantial amount of literature is required in this program, it is possible for students to specialize in rhetoric and to write a thesis in that area."

In addition to the aforementioned programs, Beverly Crockett, a graduate student who researched several programs in rhetoric and composition when deciding where to continue her studies, offers us the following additions to our list:

THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH offers the teaching of composition as an area of concentration for the Ph.D. in literature. "The area study in composition requires fifteen hours of coursework in a series of teachertraining seminars and graduate courses in rhetoric, research methods, and linguistics. Candidates prepare a final project and take an examination in order to complete the area of study, and those who complete the areasstudy may elect to write a dissertation in composition."

- THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO CIRCLE has a new Ph.D. program which includes literature, creative writing, and composition. The statement of objectives in their program description states that the program "emphasizes non-traditional fields of study, particularly composition and creative writing, but includes advanced work in literary studies as well. The aim of the program is to provide professional training primarily for educators responsible for the teaching, design, and administration of curricula in writing at all levels; for writers and writing specialists; and for college English teachers seeking advanced study in such areas as creative writing, rhetorical theory, the writing process, popular culture, and litera-ture."
- THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN AT MILWAUKEE has a composition minor, and the Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin offers a TESOL minor. Both are within Ph.D. programs.
- MIAMI UNIVERSITY (Ohio) has a comp/rhet minor within their Ph.D. lit program.

Beverly urges prospective students to request placement information from any departments they are considering, and she assures us that "most departments are quite cooperative and that their information is often enlightening and surprising (and, of course, depressing)." She has also kindly offered to respond to personal inquiries and questions sent to her new address: Dept. of English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907



A MULTI-MEDIA WRITING TEXT

When two students did poorly in my first semester of freshman English, I gave them incompletes, with the proviso that they would have to do tutorial work with me the next semester using a text which had recently come to my attention: George R. Bramer, with Dorothy Sedley, <u>Process One, A College</u> <u>Writing Program</u> (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1977). One student, whom I shall call John, had a learning disability and the other, Michael, probably had one also, though that was not "official" since he had not been tested by the psychology department.

I chose Process One because it combined a full year college-level rhetoric and grammar text with a set of film strips and cassettes which corresponded to each chapter, presenting similar materials in shorter and somewhat simpler form. (A good quick check on the level of difficulty might be the chapter on spelling, which gives explanations of rules in terms of linguistic principles without resorting to jargon). By using the tapes and film strips in conjunction with the text we (a member of our psychology department supervised John) hoped to give the students a multi-media approach to compensate for their learning disabilities. Also Process One provides a pre-test over the entire text which can be given before each student begins. This helped us to pinpoint those areas where John and Michael still needed the most attention after a semester of freshman English. Since there were also post-tests covering each chapter and self-help tests within each (the answers being provided in the text), we could design individualized programs of instruction.

As we met separately with John and Michael in our Learning Resources Center, both of them settled into a similar pattern of using the cassettes and filmstrips to review a chapter after reading it, particularly after failing a post-test on it.

The results were mixed. John wanted to be a doctor and knew he could because his father had, despite a similar disability. So he completed the year's test in a semester, changing his grade in freshman English from an F to a C. Michael, on the other hand, gave <u>Process One</u> a minimal amount of time and effort, completed only a few chapters, and seldom used the cassettes and film strips together with the text. In fact I gave him a D- instead of the original F only because of the additional work he performed, not for any significant improvement over his first semester's performance.

All in all, my trial run with <u>Process</u> <u>One</u> in a writing lab setting seemed sufficiently promising to warrant the \$500 commitment for the filmstrips and cassettes which supplement the text, and I plan to use them more widely in my freshman composition classes this fall. Alan S. Loxterman University of Richmond, Virginia A

READER ASKS...

I have recently subscribed to the WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER and find it quite interesting. My company is the manufacturer of hardware, but I am having a difficult time understanding exactly what a writing lab is. If you could take the time to outline to me what a writing lab consists of and what sort of equipment is used in the way of hardware, it would be of great help to me. Your comments and suggestions as to what the ideal lab would contain would be greatly appreciated.

We are the leading manufacturer of language laboratory equipment, and we are, of course, interested in other areas of the educational process as well. We would be very interested in adapting our equipment for use in a writing lab if it is possible.

> James J. Goodin, President ELS Educational Media 200 West Britton Road P.O. Box 20604 Oklahoma City, OK 73156

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Research in Composition Network got started at the 1979 NCTE meeting with discussion of such topics as Discourse Studies, the Composing Process, Context-Dependent Studies, Evaluation, and Instruction and Teacher Education. The Network includes a Newsletter (RCN), whose second issue describes the RCNat -NCTE discussions, also has various announcements, and -- importantly -- includes research reports (published and in-process) and messages (like "HELP!") from the researchers themselves. To receive RCN, send \$3.00 (payable to Research in Composition Network) to Ken Kantor, RCN Coordinator, Department of Language Education, 125 Aderhold Hall, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602.

WRITING CENTER ATMOSPHERE: AN EXPERIMENT

One of the most important functions of the WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER is that it encourages us to experiment with new ideas and procedures used by our various colleagues. I wish to share with the readers a technique for helping to provide an optimum learning atmosphere in the Writing Center: the use of background music.

Last year at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, I was struck by the sterile silence in our Writing Center; even during conferences the atmosphere was not as pleasant as it might have been. As a result, I undertook an experiment. For one semester I played barely audible tapes of Mozart in the background, and for one semester I used no music. I chose Mozart because I needed something that was not tumultuous and that would not engage the student's attention; Mozart symphonies tend to be fluid and soothing, and if the volume is very low, they become more an asset than a distraction.

The results far exceeded my expectations. The students seemed to find this atmosphere much more propitious than one of silence, and they made comments to this effect. The tutors, too, found this environment much more relaxed and anxiety-free than when no music was employed. Also, there were no complaints about the music. When the music was eliminated in the second semester, those students who returned to the Center expressed regret that we had done away with the tapes.

It is important to choose works that will remain in the background, The Baroque Era is particularly fertile. There are many suitable Baroque sonatas, especially if they employ strings or harpsichords. J.S. Bach's <u>Goldberg Variations</u> and <u>English Suites</u> are also excellent. In general, it is probably best to avoid works of the Romantic Era (because they usually demand emotional involvement) and of the Modern Era (because of the concentration on dissonance and abruptness of transition).

Any technique that has potential for increasing the effectiveness of our Writing Centers is worthy of experimentation. I believe the tapes greatly enhanced the operation of our Writing Center, and I hope others experiment with this medium.

> Gary A. Olson University of Alabama (formerly at Indiana U. of P nnsvlvania)

Your knowledge in the areas of your program's concentration would be appreciated here at California State University, Fresno, P.A.S.S. Program. We are a recently established student supportive service assisting students in their adademic areas. P.A.S.S. assesses students' strengths and weaknesses in their current academic course load. From these assessments, individual programs are implemented for each student. We are looking for materials to intensify our program's efficiency. Any information that you would pass onto us would help us to meet our goals of improving a student's academic skills and retention at C.S.U.F.



Pat Aguirre, Director P.A.S.S. Program California State U., Fresno Fresno, CA 93740

ON PROFESSIONAL STATUS FOR WRITING LAB DIRECTORS

Writing Lab Directors, with qualifications equal to those of other instructional staff, too often are not accorded faculty rank, accessibility to tenure, an equitable salary scale, and -- perhaps most important -- the respect of the profession. Do you agree? I need the thinking of WLN readers as I work to address these concerns through a CCC proposed resolution.

Some of you may recall, in the December 1979 issue of WLN, that I wrote about the need for such a resolution, and I asked for through the WLN. responses. Some letters were forthcoming, but not enough to bring the resolution to the floor of the conference last spring. So, instead I spoke about the matter briefly at -----fold and tear along this line-----MAIL TO: Mildred Steele, Central College, Pella, Iowa 50219

FROM: (your name and address)

The University of Alabama will host the first annual Southeastern Writing Center Conference, to be held in February, 1981. The planning committee is soliciting prospectuses or completed papers on "the effective operation of a Writing Center" and "obstacles to the effective operation of a Writing Center." The conference will focus on increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of Writing Centers. Details about the conference will appear in a future issue of the WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER.Interested parties, especially in the southeastern U.S., should submit articles to:



Gary Olson, Director The Writing Center English Department Drawer AL University of Alabama University, AL 35486

the Special Interest Session for Writing Lab Directors, and invited people there to participate in the wording of it. Muriel Harris invited me to use the WLN to carry that request further, so here it is.

Please take a few minutes to pencil in your revisions, additions, and comments to the resolution below. Then tear along the dotted line, and mail it to me by Oct. 20. I am interested in your opinions, whether pro or con. Only by taking into account many points of view can we be served. All responses will be carefully read, and, if time permits, I will send a progress report

> Mildred Steele Central College

RESOLVED: That full-time writing lab (professionals? directors? staff?) who (any qualifications?)

be regarded (in every instance?) as (regular?) faculty persons, including equality of salary and accessibility to tenure status. [Possible second sentence: It is recognized that many writing labs are admirably served by para+professional staff, and this resolution is not intended to endanger their status or positions]



FOR YOUR INFORMATION: The following resolution was passed in 1979 by the CCCC: "RESOLVED: That full-time instructors of composition and/or basic writing courses be regarded in every instance as regular faculty members and shall be accorded the same rights as all other faculty persons including quality of salary and accessibility to tenure status."

INCREASING STUDENT USE OF THE DROP-IN WRITING CENTER

As anyone who has tried to set up a peer tutoring project knows, the success of such a program can be no greater than its ability to attract tutees. Whether students return for repeat visits is dependent on a number of factors such as individual motivation and their assessments of the value of the tutorial experience. But one thing is certain: no student returns for a repeat visit who has not first made an initial visit, and it is here that a major challenge lies for those who want to get a peer tutoring program started. In setting up for our first drop-in writing center staffed by peer tutors, we underestimated the magnitude of the challenge but have since developed a promising way to meet it.

It occurred to me that since students were not coming to tutors, it might be a good idea to bring the tutors to them. My colleagues and I reasoned that seeing the tutors would give them a personal identity that could never be achieved through signs or classroom announcements. But bringing tutors into composition classes as objects for show-andtell seemed ludicrous; consequently, we decided to involve them in classroom activity without using them as authority figures. To do this we developed an exercise in which the peer tutors could be peer preceptors.

On the first visit to my composition class, the tutors participated as members of discussion groups. Each group was given a values clarification exercise previously developed by a member of our staff. Students and tutors were asked to rank order ten values or states of being such as "freedom," "happiness," and "world peace." Each group was instructed to attempt to produce a composite list acceptable to all members. Some groups reached consensus; some did not. The important part of this stage of the exercise is that the tutors were equal, inexpert members of their respective groups. Not only had they participated in a discussion in which nobody's opinion was any more correct than anyone else's, but since the exercise involved the examination of values, the tutors had revealed something of themselves to the students in the class. It is true that in a less volatile group, one tutor acted as moderator and had actively to solicit response, but this does not seem to have affected the outcome of the experiment.

Next, students were directed to write an essay about the value they cherished most. My students regularly hand in drafts for commentary before they begin final copies. This time they brought their drafts to class where they were offered the opportunity to review them with the tutors who had participated in their respective groups. Most chose to avail themselves of the opportunity, which substantiated the hypothesis that they had found the previous week's encounter with the tutors non-threatening and even stimulating. The students appeared to be comfortable with the transition of their peers from equal participants to peer tutors. In fact, several students voluntarily made appointments to see a tutor out of class. This workshop session had been a noisy success.

As the experiment was repeated in other classes, student use of the drop-in center increased. We hope that this trend will continue, for as more students are motivated to make initial visits to the tutors, the result will be the most effective long-term solution to the problem of underutilization--word of mouth advertising from satisfied tutees.

Thomas J. Morrissey
State University College, Plattsburgh

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WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

-Supplementary Mailing List - #32

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