WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

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Perhaps it's just the hectic pace of the beginning of the semester, or perhaps the very real decline in students' verbal skills has dipped below some critical point. But a member of our newsletter group commented recently, "New students coming in our lab this semester are more poorly prepared than I can ever remember--and they are not even in our remedial course!" How would you characterize the students you are seeing this semester?

Along with your responses, keep sending those announcements, articles, questions, reviews, names of new members, and $5/year donations (in checks made payable to Purdue University, but sent to me) to:

Muriel Harris, editor
WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER
Dept. of English
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47907

THE SELECTION AND TRAINING OF PEER TUTORS

At Lincoln University, peer tutors are an integral part of the University's Writing Program. Their purpose is not to lighten an instructor's load, nor to provide an editing service for the students, nor to act as class monitors during lab hours. Under our program, the role of the peer tutor is clearly defined. Because much is expected of them, they are carefully chosen and carefully trained. The selection process begins with the instructors in the two basic composition courses. They may recommend any student with a grade of B or above who has successfully completed both composition classes, and who has the ability to work with other students on both a one-to-one basis and in small groups. The recommendation is made to the Writing Lab Coordinator who completes the process of selection through interviews with each student and examination of writings that she has done. This selection process takes place prior to the beginning of each semester, and is completed by registration.

Once the peer tutors are selected, they enroll in courses in which peer tutors are trained. These courses, taught by the Writing Lab Coordinator, do not meet on a regularly scheduled basis, but are set up as a series of meetings which continue throughout the semester. The first meeting takes place before classes begin so that the peer tutors can meet with the teacher they will be working with. This first meeting, along with most of the others, is held in the Writing Lab, which is really the heart of Lincoln's Writing Program. Since many of the tutors will be working with Basic Writing courses, and these classes meet in the model-classroom section of the Lab, and since all the tutors are required to put in a certain number of hours in the Lab each week, the first meeting is also the time when the tutors familiarize themselves with the lab. It is also at this meeting that tutors are given a description of the Writing Program, and an idea of what their role in that program is to be. In most cases, the tutors are already familiar with several facets of the program since they have gone through at least the two composition courses, and in rare instances the Basic Writing course also.

At this initial meeting the first area important to peer tutor training is introduced, assigned reading on peer tutoring and teach-

erless writing. The tutors are encouraged to read Ken Bruffee, Peter Elbow, Marcia Silver, and Mina Shaughnessy, among others. There are also articles in the lab's library written by the Writing Lab Coordinator and other English instructors on peer tutoring and group work in writing classes. While the peer tutors are not tested on these readings, they are required to read as many as possible throughout the semester, to keep a list of what they have read, and to report on it in both their midterm and final evaluations.

This first meeting is important because peer tutors get an overview of the program, meet and talk with the teacher they are assigned to, and tour the Writing Lab, familiarizing themselves with the various AV equipment. Meetings such as these continue throughout the semester, and may take different forms as the tutors become more confident in their positions, encounter problems they need help dealing with, or simply wish to talk over their successes and failures with their peers--the other tutors. These meetings, plus workshops and seminars attended by both tutors and teachers, comprise the second area of peer tutor training. At sessions like the initial one, the tutors meet with the Coordinator in the Writing Lab to discuss success stories, problems, and pleasures that are all part of peer tutoring.

During my two semesters as a peer tutor frustrations were also shared. Each of us had at least once set up regular tutoring sessions with a student who had expressed a desire to improve, only to have him stop coming after the first time. Becoming aware that we were not alone with these problem students or problems of our own was invaluable to our learning process. It lessened the sense of personal failure that we invariably felt when unable to motivate a student. We also found that we all shared a common anxiety: a lack of confidence in our own abilities. Most of us were not quite sure if we had the necessary skills to be tutoring others, and we were not at all confident that we could live up to the instructors' expectations of us. Group discussions were beneficial in this respect. At first we seemed to dwell on our weaknesses, but we soon realized we all had strengths as well. These positive feelings were reinforced when students would take the time to let us know that our help was appreciated, or when we could see visible progress in a student or a writing group.

Besides group meetings with the Coordinator, tutors also meet individually with the instructors they are working with. The frequency of these sessions is determined by the teacher and tutor, usually depending upon their schedules. Some are able to meet often, such as before every class, while others work out a weekly meeting. At these conferences, teacher and tutor plan future classes, discuss past classes, look together at writings that their students are working on, talk over any problems concerning individual students, the groups, or the class as a whole, and review their own effectiveness or ineffectiveness in coping with all these areas.

In addition to meetings, peer tutors also attend workshops given by the Lab Coordinator or other instructors within the department. Workshops that I attended included two grammar drills given by one of our professors. Each of us tutoring during that first semester had expressed a lack of confidence in our ability to handle questions concerning basic grammar. We all felt as if we knew <u>when</u> something was right or wrong, but not <u>why</u>. High school English seemed like something in our remote past, as in some cases it really was. While it was not possible to complete in two sessions a crash course in English grammar, the talks did prove helpful, if only to assure us that a comprehensive knowledge of grammar was not necessary in talking with students about writing.

Another workshop involved sharpening our evaluation skills. For this occasion, the Coordinator set up an exercise in which we were separated into two groups, and each group was given a sample of a student's writing. Our task was to identify problem areas, to determine which problem we would first choose to work on with the student, and then to specify how we would conduct the tutoring session. The two sample writings were quite different, with one obviously written by a student in a Basic Writing course, and the other from a student in a composition course. The group reviewing the first paper decided that the student had basic grammar problems that should be dealt with before even talking about writing, while the second group felt that their student needed to work first on limiting the topic that he had chosen to write about. Talking this over within our groups gave us the opportunity to see how others approached situations, and to share the knowledge that we were each accumulating.

While most of our workshops were both

beneficial and enjoyable, the highlight of my first semester as a peer tutor was a weekend retreat our school was able to provide for instructors and tutors in the disciplines of English, Reading, Science and Math. This retreat had a two-fold purpose: discussion of problems which had already arisen; and planning for future classes. Our first session was attended by teachers and tutors from all four disciplines. During this meeting, we broke into groups, and each group was given a simulated situation involving students, tutors, and instructors. The groups each evaluated their situation, then presented what they felt would be appropriate ways of dealing with it. Others were free to disagree with or critique the methods presented, or to add their own insights.

The peer tutors next met individually with the teacher with whom we were working. In these sessions, we assessed what we had accomplished so far, and what we hoped to accomplish before the semester was over. As we talked, I began to see a direction to the work we had done so far with our class. Up to this point, I had not had a clear idea of exactly what our objectives were, since I had not previously gone through the composition courses. Working as a peer tutor was the first real experience I had had with these English classes. Often, the information presented to the class was new to me. I frequently felt totally inadequate, and ill-prepared to tutor other students. Although this feeling never completely disappeared, talking over the class plan for the entire semester made me feel that I had at least begun to get a grasp on what our goals were.

The last workshop during this retreat involved all the peer tutors as a group. We met with the head of our Freshman Program moderating the session, and the instructors as audience. This meeting was similar to the ones we had with our Writing Lab Coordinator. We discussed how tutors in each discipline functioned, what problems we confronted with the methods we used, and what seemed to work well for each of us. In this exchange of ideas, we looked for insights that we could each incorporate into our own style of tutoring. Many times we found our problems to be similar, despite the different subject areas. The one that seemed endemic to all disciplines was student apathy. So often students come to see tutors because their teachers tell them to, or because they know they are failing and think that perhaps tutors have the magic formula to pull their D's and F's up to C's or B's. And so we are all faced with the same problem: how do we motivate these persons who are only in Freshman Program classes because it is required by the school? None of us had the definitive answer, and we conceeded that there probably was no definitive answer. It is something that must be dealt with individually with each student. Not all problems we discussed were this frustrating, however. Some were technical, such as determining where to draw the line between tutoring the student and doing his work for him; some were more personal, such as coping with students who asked not only for help with their classwork, but help with emotional or social problems as well. While all questions were not answered nor all problems solved during this weekend, tutors and instructors alike felt that we had benefitted from it. And an added benefit was the ample time we were left with to enjoy ourselves at the resort area where we were staying. Unfortunately, our program has not had the funds over subsequent semesters to provide another workshop of this nature.

This brings me to the last and most important area of peer tutoring at Lincoln, and that is our participation in the classroom and the Writing Lab. Our program is set up to utilize peer tutors in both the Basic Writing course and the composition courses. While they may function somewhat differently in each course according to the teaching methods of the instructor they are working with, there are standard roles that each fulfills. In all three courses, the tutor is active in small group work. The purpose of groups in writing classes is to share writing with one's peers, and to receive feedback, both positive and tough-minded. During my first semester as a peer tutor, I worked with John in an English 101 class. Within our class there were five writing groups, each containing five or six students. On the days that we worked in groups, I would join one group and participate as a student in whatever activity they were working on. At the first of the semester, it was apparent that many of the students were not used to sharing their writing with anyone but a teacher, and they did not see that as sharing. I remember sitting with one group when none of them wanted to read first. Their excuses were, "Mine is still in the rough draft stage," or, "I'm not ready for anyone to hear this yet." I had brought a sample of my writing, so I read first that day. I think that in itself would have broken the ice for them, but there was an added factor that really served to

show them how a writing group could work. It happened that on that day the Writing Lab Coordinator was visiting the class to observe and evaluate teacher and peer tutor performance, and as I began reading, she joined our group. When I finished, there was an extended silence. It was obvious that the students did not feel comfortable commenting on my writing, but the Coordinator did not share their reticence. She began by pointing out what she liked about the paper, then she commented on areas that could stand improvement. At first the students were content to let her continue, but soon they began talking aobut some of her criticisms and even questioning whether or not they were all valid. Before the class period was over, they all read their papers and talked to each other about what they had written.

Our class did not work in writing groups every day. Because there was much new material to present, some periods were spent with John explaining such things as freewriting, or the importance of a role and audience for each paper. During these sessions, I found it beneficial to participate as a student. Often the material he presented was new to me as well as to them, and there was no other function I could fulfill than that of a class member. This fact was brought home to me on a day when he gave an open-book test in class. I took it along with everyone else, and I found it just as difficult and had as many complaints about it as any of the other students.

Another role I filled in class was that of a go-between. Occasionally a student would ask me about a point he was not clear on, or would ask that I relay a specific question to the teacher. Some of them seemed to feel more comfortable asking me first. This could have something to do with the fact that many students feel that any question they might have is automatically a senseless one, and so they would much rather have the peer tutor look foolish asking it than themselves. I felt that my participation as a student at these times was useful since the questions might not have been asked otherwise. There actually were a few students in the class who were quite reticent about talking to the instructor, but seemed comfortable in coming to me. By the same token, some preferred going directly to the teacher instead of the peer tutor. Through this division of labor, we were able to work closely with most of the students in the class.

During my second semester as a peer tutor, I worked with an English 100 class, which required that I alter my role somewhat. Since this was a remedial course, I functioned in it differently than in the composition course. At no time in this course did I perform just as a student. Instead, I concentrated on making sure that the instructions and concepts the instructor presented were understood by the entire class. Because I could watch the students as the instructor spoke, it was easy for me to see who was taking notes, who looked puzzled, or who was doing homework for another class. I would then relay the information to the teacher, who could go over the material again, or I would talk directly with any student whom I felt had not received or understood the information. It would sometimes take repeated explanations or restatements before certain points would become clear to the class. This carried through even to the small group work. While the students were writing and sharing their writing, the instructor and I both circulated through the groups, taking time to be sure that directions were followed and instructions understood. In working with individual students, our time was spent talking not just about writing, but about grammar and the importance of writing in standard English as well. Because students in this course varied in the speed and skill they could devote to an assignment, we would frequently have students working on different projects at the same time. It was not unusual to have half the class in the classroom portion of the Lab working on one assignment while the other half worked in the Lab area on grammar usage modules or another assignment. In these instances, the instructor and I could each devote our full attention to one group. At no time did the students voice displeasure about working with me instead of the instructor.

As a peer tutor in both the remedial and the composition courses, I assisted the instructors in evaluating students' writing, planning assignments, and even at times conducting the class. The extent of a tutor's duties within a class depends largely on what teacher she is working with. Some instructors include peer tutors in all areas of the course, while others prefer that they perform in a more limited role.

In addition to working with the class, peer tutors also put in several hours a week in the Writing Lab, under the supervision of

the two professional tutors who work in the Lab. Our function there is two-fold. The Lab first of all serves the students in the Basic Writing courses as both classroom and an audio-visual learning center. The students are required to put in a certain amount of time each week working on the grammar and usage modules. The peer tutors assist the professional tutors in answering any questions the students have, setting up the various equipment, handing out module forms, and collecting finished work. The Lab also serves as a tutoring center for students in all three composition courses. They can come in on a drop-in basis, or they can make an appointment to see a certain tutor. Some peer tutors also see students outside class and lab hours, depending on their time schedules.

Classroom participation, tutoring within the Lab, attending meetings and workshops, and doing assigned readings are all part of peer tutoring at Lincoln. Because it is a course, a final grade is given based on successful participation in and completion of the above-mentioned areas. Two written assignments are also required, one at mid-term, and one as a final. These are self-evaluations, in which the peer tutors assess how well they have performed in each area, progress they have made working with the class and with individual students, and what grade they feel they have earned in the course. The instructors also submit evaluations on the tutor they worked with, and these, plus observations made by the Writing Lab Coordinator, determine the peer tutors' final grade.

Obviously, being a peer tutor is no easy task. Tutors must be prepared to devote both time and energy to the course. Adding up the hours one must put in is enough to discourage many potential tutors. Besides the three hour composition class to be attended each week, and the two hours spent working in the Lab, the tutor must fit into her schedule the meetings and workshops that are required in the course plus meetings with the instructor she works with, and time for going over students' writings with the instructors. And, as I mentioned previously, some tutors choose to help students in their free hours as well. It is true that this may seem a lot to do simply for three hours credit. Most peer tutors would tell you that they value not only the experience, but the psychic rewards as well. And speaking strictly for myself, I value the opportunity to work as an equal partner with high quality instructors, and to be given the opportunity to write about peer tutoring.

Debby Trevathan
Peer Tutor
Lincoln University

Stephen P. Witte and Lester Faigley, Evaluating College Writing Programs (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University, 1983), 120 pp., $8.50

As described in the publisher's release, this book "critically reviews studies designed to evaluate composition programs at the University of Northern Iowa, the University of California at San Diego, Miami University, and the University of Texas.

Because present evaluation systems are so limited that they are neither reliable nor valid, the authors realized a need for theoretical and practical guidance, which they offer through discussion of generalities from the four studies and pertinent questions and guidance to evaluators of composition programs. The questions they devised demand much of program evaluators: What do we presently know? What assumptions are we making and how do those assumptions limit our knowledge? Are those limitations necessary or desirable? What do we still need to know?"

The book can be ordered from Southern Illinois University Press, P.O. Box 3697, Carbondale, Illinois 62901 (618/453-2281).

A Reader Comments....

The Newsletter continues to be an invaluable aid. When I made plans to begin having peer tutors last year, I had only to review the comments and advice of those who had written about peer tutoring in the Newsletter. My plans fell into place with no false starts, thanks to others' experience.

Lorraine Perkins
St. Cloud State
University

WRITING INSTRUCTION IN A (NON)ACADEMIC UNIVERSITY CENTER

When I was hired in January to set up a Basic Skills Program for a University Student Development Center, I found challenges that made my 14 years of teaching basic English Department courses child's play in comparison. Since the Center already had a reading specialist on board and was in the process of hiring a math specialist, it fell to me to develop the writing component of the program as well as to supervise these other areas.

Certainly, developing a writing program from scratch loomed as a pleasurable challenge akin to establishing my ideal university from the bottom up, but the questions I first had to know enough to ask and the answers that had to follow often made me long for the security blanket of a set class meeting in a set classroom following a relatively set syllabus. The first, and philosophical, hurdle I encountered was the notion that since my new employer falls under the aegis of Student Services, then whatever is taught within the Student Development Center is extra-curricular. The academic departments handle curricula. This viewpoint caused me not a little consternation: what in the world is nonacademic, extracurricular writing? I could offer, I suppose, personal letter writing as my nonacademic, extracurricular writing component, but that is certainly not what the students who frequent the Center request. They want help with academic writing assignments, such as composing chapter summaries or book reviews; they would be incredulous at my suggestion they write their grandmothers instead. In such a way, then, question one was answered for me: my writing component would have to be an intercurricular academic-support service, addressing the needs of the students whom I was hired to "serve."

But what of the academic department already most concerned with writing skills? What was to be my relationship with the English Department? Even though there is no direct connection here between the English Department and Student Development Center instruction in reading and writing (such as the standard practice of shared staff), there obviously are commonalities in instructional purpose and subskills that must be addressed. Some repetition between the two programs, therefore, is not only unavoidable but laudable for reinforcement of crucial concepts, such as targeting main idea and supporting detail in both reading and writing instruction. However, either to duplicate exactly the English Department program within the Student Development Center program or to circumvent it by choosing an approach to basic skills radically different from that espoused by the traditional department would be inefficient, confusing to the students, and probably suicidal when the English Department noticed that another area, and one nonacademic from its perspective, had hung out a shingle reading "Rival Writing Instruction."

Again, student needs addressed the problem and helped focus further on the features of the emerging Student Development Center writing component. In a fairly large, open admissions university, there are so many students with so many, and often severe, writing deficiencies that no one department, or Center, can handle the business alone. A semester's observations of students' reasons for seeking writing aid within a Student Development Center rather than within or in addition to the English Department provided me direction. These students materialize in the Center's fledgling writing program for four basic reasons:

1. The students want help with a particular course assignment. If the assignment is for an English course, I refer them back to the tutoring program within the English Department. If they are disinclined to take this route or are facing a writing assignment in a class other than English, I take them to the Center's tutors for aid. Because of my support of writing as an interdisciplinary activity, even before I developed the broader "Writing Process" Program (discussed below), I drafted the first version of what is now revised and termed the "Academic Writing" packet in which I outline approaches to writing assignments not generally taught in English, such as chapter summaries, essay tests, critical book reviews.

2. The students are suffering from an advanced case of writing anxiety and want support before they enroll in (often repeating) a particular writing course. I had heard of pre-calculus, but had never realized the demand that exists for a pre-composition course. These numerous students require an overview of the entire writing process with special attention both to weaknesses that emerge and to their sweaty palms that are frightened of holding a pen.

3. They are either enrolled in a Learning Skills course taught in the Student Development Center or are participating in the Center's probation program, and their instructor or counselor detects a writing deficiency. These students require a more formal assessment of their perceived weaknesses and individualized programs to address their needs.

4. They are already working in the Center's Learning Lab on study skills or reading and "discover" that poor writing skills as much as inadequate study or reading skills are the cause of low grades on tests. These are certainly ideal students who determine on their own that writing has some connection to learning and to adequate demonstration of that learning on tests.

After a semester's cataloging of these needs and of the tactics the Center was taking in addressing them, I drew up a report that summarized and evaluated the direction the Student Development Center seemed to be heading in its burgeoning writing component. The first person to receive a hand-carried copy was the Director of Composition. Our two-hour discussion of university students' writing needs and our collaborative efforts to address them was profitable indeed, such that there are now two-way referrals, to English graduate students tutoring in the Center, and feelings on both sides that we need one another and the students need us both.

Another relationship that I targeted as a priority item was the one between the writing component and the other programs within the Student Development Center. I certainly do not want to be viewed as empire-building by my Student Development Center colleagues any more than I want the English Department so to perceive my role. The Center has historically been oriented toward counseling and study skills; I believe this sound base should be broadened but not supplanted by basic skills. I have added, of course, a writing section (an essay) into the Center's assessment package, but when I discuss test results with students, I always take a holistic approach to the data. As poor as a writing sample might be, a student's current courses might well demand more attention be paid to reading deficits and study techniques with writing instruction worked in as a supplement to an individualized skills-building program, or even delayed to the following semester. One technique I use regularly with students to focus on reading while working in some writing is to require students to write paragraph summaries of reading selections they have been assigned. As I have also happily discovered and mentioned about category-4 students above, requests for writing aid occur naturally after a student has been working on reading and study skills for a while. Thus my view, and I believe the view of my new colleagues, of how writing is fitting into the existing Student Development Center programs is very positive: its integrated, interdisciplinary, whole-student focus I find a workable alternative, maybe even a preferable alternative, to a separate university writing center.

These important issues that speak to the purposes and fit of a Student Development Center writing component at least temporarily resolved, I tackled this summer the crucial question of how best to organize the Center's writing materials to address as efficiently as possible the varying programmatic requirements of students. Despite the national tendency to focus academic-support-service writing instruction on grammar and usage, I rejected this approach both because of the types of requests I receive from students and because of my own definition of "writing." My view of composing certainly runs counter not only to focusing solely on surface features of writing but to separating across an entire campus the instruction in rhetorical principles from the instruction in edited American English. It may well be that an individual student needs work only in remediating sentence fragments and comma splices, but she or he should also receive reinforcement of the point that writing is a process of which editing is but a small, and final part. Thus the Student Development Center Writing Program that has gone into effect this fall is termed the "Writing Process." Its eight modules address all phases of successful writing from brainstorming a topic to editing usage so that even a student whose problems are limited to the final editing module of the program will literally see when she or he receives a copy of the program that editing is an ending, not a beginning or substitute for writing.

To begin the complete program, a category 2, 3, or 4 student writes an essay which is then evaluated by the Basic Skills staff, the results summarized on a feedback sheet which is shared with the student during a curricular planning session. This evaluation sheet lists in detail the features of successful

writing from audience awareness to appropriate forms of pronouns. Next to each feature is a module number, such as W2b, that correlates with a specific set of materials in the Writing Program. After discussing with the student the characteristics of the sample essay that indicate the need for remediation, his/her self-perceived needs, and current or future writing requirements, the instructor directs the student to the appropriate modules. The levels of each module--overview, materials to read, practice, application, instructor check--are designed to build in both mastery at each level (as much as is possible with a recursive process) and further diagnosis not provided by the initial writing sample. Also purposeful is the program's directive to the student to select for the application phase of each module a topic that is integral to one of his/her current classes, this to reinforce the crucial link between writing and learning. A student who completes the entire program (all modules) will have written but one essay, but this one many times over, thus learning experientially that writing is a process.*

I have also learned a great deal experientially. Not only is setting up a student services writing program a delicate process, and one more political than I would prefer, it shares with all interdisciplinary, supplementary writing programs the awesome task of preparing students for writing competency in a variety of content areas. To feel responsible, as I do, for developing a student's ability to handle his/her entire semester's curriculum rather than just succeed in freshman English has contributed to a sleepless night or two. I know that there are still alternative materials to be bought and fed into the Writing Program if and when the budget allows, to fit the diverse needs of the university's ESL and LD populations, for examples. I also know that there are numerous revisions to be made in the program that I am not even aware of yet. But three students who "field"-tested the "Writing Process" during the first term of summer school have given me hope that I am on the right track.

All three students, seniors in their respective and different colleges, had previously failed Junior English, a university competency-writing requirement, and had sought solace in the Center, two referred by their advisors and one (who had thereby missed May graduation) by his dean. To their relief, and mine, all three passed Junior English the second session of summer school in good style--2 B's and 1 C. Such success with its accompanying improvement in self-esteem has to be the bottom line of a student-focused, academic-supported-service writing program.

Karen Hodges
University of Arkansas

*Copies of both the evaluation sheet and the "Writing Process" program are available upon request. Please write to me c/o Student Development Center 106, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR 72701.

Rita Phipps, The Successful Student's Handbook: A Step-by-Step Guide to Study, Reading, and Thinking Skills (Seattle: U. of Washington Press, 1983), 184 pp., $8.95.

As described by the publisher, this study and reading skills text "takes the student step by step through the learning process, starting with chapters on motivation and scheduling. Moving from the basic skills of note-taking, memorization, cross-referencing, and test-taking, Phipps then devotes three key chapters to reading skills. Also covered are outlining and summarizing, consolidating lecture notes and outside reading notes, and writing a research paper. The book ends with a checklist, summarizing what the student should be doing from start to finish. Throughout, Phipps offers examples, cross-references, and exercises. The Successful Student's Handbook also functions as a reader, starting at the sixth grade level and ending at the thirteenth."

Copies can be ordered from the University of Washington Press, Seattle, Washington 98105.

A Reader Comments...

This is just a note to say how pleased I've been with the Writing Lab Newsletter throughout the past year. Although our K-12 tutoring program is not exclusively a writing lab, I've found many articles and most newsletters to be very pertinent. The June 1983 issue was particularly timely, as I was wrestling with an evaluation tool when Harvey Kail's article helped me not to forget a few key points.

Janice Cuddahee
City-Wide Tutoring Program

CONFERENCE ON BASIC WRITING SKILLS--CALL FOR PANEL PROPOSALS

The Conference on Basic Writing Skills invites panel proposals for its special interest session, "Challenging the Basic Writer," which will take place at the 1984 Conference on College Composition and Communication in New York, March 29-31, 1984. Proposals are invited for panel presentations dealing with effective ways of helping basic writers extend their skills in writing and/or reading.

Send brief proposals (no more than 1-2 pages) by November 1, 1983 to:

Andrew Moss
English and Foreign
Languages Department
Cal Poly, Pomona
3801 West Temple Ave.
Pomona, Calif. 91768

MATERIALS FOR SALE AT HALF-COST OF DUPLICATING AND MAILING

While they last, we will sell 20 extra copies of packets covering both "peer tutor training" and "organizing a writing center" (100 pages) for $3.00 including envelope and mailing. Send check to: Prof. Ulle E. Lewes, Writing Resource Center, Ohio Wesleyan University, Delaware, OH 43015.

DEAR EDITOR: I'D JUST LIKE TO SAY THAT . . .: A LETTER TO THE EDITOR BW ASSIGNMENT

Approximately three-fourths of my BW students published during the past semester. The first item hit print in October; the last, a few days after Christmas. The form of their publication is the Letter to the Editor. Letters appeared in the school newspaper, the Blazer, the Joliet Herald-News, and the Chicago Sun-Times.

Having students publish is not remarkable. But my students are basic writers assigned to a sub-freshman writing course in our Academic Skills Center. When I read the last one to appear in print for the fall semester, I decided to share my experiences with the lesson assignment that generated this outburst. And, I assure you, the accomplishment is my Academic Skills Center students' since the assignment is neither new nor original. I first made a similar assignment to a regular English rhetoric class in the late 1950's. As I recall, one male student had his letter published in Esquire.

What inspired the second generation of Letters to the Editor was an exchange of letters and phone calls that I had with a Chicago newspaper sports columnist. He made an unfortunate remark about community college athletic programs citing our school as a symbol. I attacked via a letter. He apologized. I shared the battle with my students as it continued. Their interest motivated me to produce a cassette tape-booklet lesson as a final writing assignment in our Skills Center BW class, a Letter to the Editor.

Basically, the original assignment consisted of a re-telling of my adventures with such letters, copies of my published letters, and a suggested model for such letters. Mainly, I thought that my students might enjoy writing crank letters as much as I have through the years. However, as the semesters rolled on and students were published with remarkable regularity, a bulletin board became an impractical way of sharing student letters with their peers. Therefore, I made a supplementary booklet and added it to my original lesson. Student letters continued to appear and overflowed the bulletin board. I continued to write my own crank letters and occasionally had one published. Then in February, 1980, Glamour published an excellent brief article "Get Your Letter to the Editor Published." That, too, joined our materials. By then I realized that the assignment was a winner--at least as far as my BW students were concerned. In time, the Glamour article was added to the first booklet, and a second supplementary booklet joined the lesson resources. Now a third booklet appears in order, just for the past semester alone.

Why has this particular lesson turned out so happily for all concerned? Well, the entire lesson has developed into a non-threatening, relaxed sharing experience. In effect, the students have worked out the lesson material themselves. It builds student confidence to have the letter as their last writing assignment of the semester in a Pass-Fail laboratory course. Moreover, I have eased into a low-key approach, requiring a rough draft only. We go through the drafts in a one-on-one conference,

sometimes being joined informally by other students waiting for help. After we edit the draft, I send them to check with our clerk-secretary-para-pro miracle worker, Marilyn Tease, to see if she is available to type the letter. Most of them have never seen their writing in typescript, and the effect sometimes nearly overwhelms them. A typical comment is a broad smile and the comment, "Hey, that looks pretty good!"

At that point I ask whether the students wish to submit their letters to a newspaper and explain that they can request to have their names withheld. Usually they send the letters off. In a few days we discover letters in one of the three newspapers, or students proudly bear their published letters to us. One epic day three letters appeared in the Joliet paper. Several students had the same letters published both in the school and town papers. Somehow my BW students seem to have radar that detects topics that appeal to editors. They write about cruelty to animals, traffic problems, the real meaning of Christmas, the condition of roads and highways, a restored movie palace, the behavior of students, whatever they find when they look in their hearts.

By the way, in the first two weeks of December I managed to get one letter of my own published in the school newspaper and an article published in a national running magazine. I was happy and relieved. How mortifying to have BW students appearing in print day after day and not being a part of the Academic Skills Center party!

Myra J. Linden
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P.S. One girl came in and informed me that her mother had framed her letter.

Another girl explained that when her brother read her letter which had been submitted to the school newspaper he urged her to retype it and submit it to the Chicago Sun-Times. She did and it was published in the school newspaper on Monday and in the Chicago paper on the next day.

Today we discovered that apparently the school paper had saved letters from last semester for the first issue of this semester. Seven of the eight letters in the paper were written by my sub-freshman Developmental Writing students.

WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER
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