

## Such good friends: Cooperation between the English department and the writing lab

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Administrators of writing labs face a delicate problem. The students we work with have, in effect, two teachers for their English courses: one in the classroom, the other in the lab. Forestalling misunderstanding and friction under these circumstances demands all we can summon of anticipation, sensitivity, and tact.

As I did my best to cope with such problems during my early months as a writing lab director, I inevitably wondered how other writing lab directors manage, and decided to query a group of them. Because—as always—I was working with a limited budget, I chose a small sample of 25 directors and sent them a questionnaire.<sup>1</sup> Their responses provide a composite picture of problems, suggested solutions, and clear successes.

I sent four open-ended, nondirective questions to these directors:

1. Could you briefly describe any problems, major or minor, in articulating your writing lab's work with the freshman English program or with other courses?
2. Which problem is most serious?
3. What steps have you found effective in alleviating or eliminating each of these problems?
4. Is the director of your lab a full-fledged member of the English department? If not, does that fact create problems?

**Problems.** Replies to the questionnaire exhibit enough consensus to indicate that some generalizations can safely be made.<sup>2</sup> The problems that writing lab directors encounter when articulating their programs with English or other courses are strikingly similar. Fifty-eight percent of the replies report misunderstanding on the part of both faculty and students as to the role of the writing lab in helping students with their papers. This was also most frequently reported as the "most serious" problem writing lab directors encounter. Some faculty members feel extreme suspicion of the lab, fearing that tutors are "ghost-writing" papers for the students. Other faculty members seem to expect that they can send student papers to be evaluated and given a grade by lab personnel. Students, for their part, frequently view the lab as a proofreading or editing service.

Even when the lab's function is clearly understood by faculty and students,

problems arise. Some faculty members, for example, disagree with the lab's priorities as to the order in which skills should be taught, according to nine of my respondents. Directors of labs that use peer tutors report that some faculty suspect the qualifications of peer tutors. One respondent cited "inadequately-trained tutors" as a genuine problem, implying a deeper problem—that faculty at that institution are unwilling to support an adequate tutor-training program.

Other problems that almost all my respondents have had to deal with are faculty members who refuse to refer students to the lab, or who delay referring them until it is impossible to give them adequate help in the time remaining in the term; faculty who will not comply with the writing lab's request for a diagnosis of a student's problems, making it impossible to know how the instructor wants the student helped; and—this was almost unanimous—students who fail to attend regularly enough to make significant progress.

**A few solutions.** The answers to my third question offered valuable suggestions. At the root of most of these, predictably, are careful planning, continuing communication, and meticulous training of tutors coupled with on-going observation of their work.

More than half of my respondents suggest that one way of assuring that department and lab are not working at cross-purposes is to have the lab director elicit from the English department faculty an agreed-upon set of guidelines or priorities for tutoring students. Although philosophies of teaching composition will vary, a group of teachers can surely arrive at a common set of minimal standards for an acceptable paper and the lab director can stress these in training tutors. Later, as tutors become aware of varying emphases of individual instructors, they can respond by respecting these emphases. One teacher values concise, clear, and graceful writing; another, originality and sparkle; yet another, strong organization and correctness. Difficulties that might arise from such different preferences can be largely prevented by tutors trained in sensitive and intelligent management of the tutoring conference.

English departments and writing labs should also cooperate in establishing policies as to how instructors will treat papers that have been prepared with tutorial help. Are students to be allowed to work with a tutor at every step of the writing process or will they be required to do a paper on their own and get help only with the revision after the instructor has seen the initial effort? Will papers that have been written with tutorial assistance be graded in exactly the same way as those that are entirely a student's unassisted labor? Will instructors allow late submission of papers prepared with lab help, on grounds that students may have trouble getting an appointment, or may require a number of conferences to complete a paper?

My respondents agree it is important that such potential areas of misunderstanding be, as much as possible, anticipated. The lab director must be sure that his or her staff is clear about, and abides by, departmental policy or the preference of the individual instructor. Meticulous attention to these matters might even be one way to help to allay suspicions that tutors are "ghostwriting" students' papers for them.

Replies to my questions also recommend frequent reciprocal communication about writing assignments. No lab can function effectively with an English department unless tutors are fully informed about the assignments that students

are working with. Faculty should send a copy of each assignment to the lab and should be willing to respond to questions if the lab staff needs help in interpreting it. If students are given written grading criteria, the lab should have a copy.

Occasional meetings of department and lab personnel can also aid in preventing misunderstandings about assignments and in clarifying purposes and goals. A teacher who plans to make an elaborate or complex assignment, for example, might invite tutors to sit in on a classroom session, or might meet with them in the lab to go over it. Tutors, by the way, can be an invaluable aid in appraising assignments, for they are aware not only of outstanding successes but also of unexpected difficulties and confusions. Surely ill-conceived and ill-defined assignments account for a great many failures in student performance.

For its part, the writing lab staff must keep meticulous records of all conferences with students and must be prepared to consult with faculty members about student progress and problems. Some of the record forms sent to me as examples were impressively thorough. Teachers should be notified of the number of conferences a student has had on each paper and should receive a brief summary of what aspects of the paper were worked on. This can be done simply with a checklist, or the tutor can write a brief summary.

Some of my respondents included another warning that is relevant: the necessity for restraint in tutors' expressed attitudes to students. "Ghostwriting" a paper is only the worst of several errors that tutors can fall into. Only an inexperienced or ill-advised tutor would ever, for example, say to a student "This paper is really good! You ought to get at least a B on it."

Another of these potential trouble areas lies in the special feeling that tutors, particularly peer tutors, sometimes develop for students they work with. They often see how very hard the student has tried; they know the paper is much improved over early drafts; and if such effort results in a grade of only C- or D, it is sometimes difficult not to agree with the student that the teacher is unfair. But it may be that the student really did not fulfill the teacher's assignment—this is one compelling reason why the lab must have copies of all assignments. Or it may simply be that this is a teacher who rewards only life and sparkle in a paper and is unimpressed by the impeccable but dull. It may even be that the teacher is unfair. Whatever the case, tutor training must emphasize the professionalism of not criticizing an instructor to his or her students. It can do no good, and it can do a great deal of mischief.

**Making friends.** The mischief it can do is to alienate the English department faculty. That loss of friendship can be costly. To be effective, the writing lab must be supported by a teaching staff that has learned to have confidence in the lab and encourages students who need the lab's help to seek it. That confidence can, of course, be jeopardized in other ways. Occasionally a teacher will receive an unacceptable paper from a student who is getting help, or is supposed to be getting it, from the writing lab. In such cases, consultation with records might show that the student has not come in for conferences, has not taken the advice of the tutor, or is simply going to need more than a single term's work to bring his or her writing up to an acceptable standard. On the other hand, a tutor may have misunderstood the assignment, or may have been unwise enough to have taken the student's word about it. It is even possible that a tutor was perfunctory or gave the student bad advice. It happens. But these difficulties can be surmounted

with good planning, frequent consultation, and good will on the part of the lab director.

Lab tutors who are English majors can also strengthen the bond between lab and department. Familiar with many of the teaching staff, they too can serve as mediators between faculty and students, consulting on assignments or providing information about a student's progress. I am not, of course, recommending that the writing lab staff be limited to English majors. Some of my respondents point out the judiciousness of using majors from other disciplines as well. Their mere presence in the lab demonstrates that it is not only those eccentric people in the English department who attach importance to skilled writing.

My respondents also agree that harmony between the writing lab and the English department is much easier to maintain if the director of the writing lab is a full-fledged member of the English department. "This is crucial to maintain confidence and respect," was one reply. If the job of writing lab director is delegated to a part-time person, or one without full credentials, that fact suggests to the department, and to the rest of the institution, that the department doesn't really see the teaching of writing as a matter of much moment.

Further, only a member of the English department can be fully aware of departmental philosophies of teaching composition and know the individual instructors' strengths, weaknesses, and idiosyncracies. And only a member of the English department, particularly if he or she is a composition or rhetoric specialist, can make an invaluable contribution in planning and making changes in the composition program. By the same token, if the writing lab director is one of their colleagues, familiar and trusted, the English staff finds it easier to consult with him or her about lab policies, about individual students, or even about the effectiveness of assignments and exercises.

There are other ways in which members of the English department can and should be closely involved in the writing lab. One of my respondents reports that specialists in dialect, English as a second language, rhetoric, grammar, and style have been invited to participate in seminars with tutors. The director of the composition program can discuss philosophy and goals with the lab staff. The lab should, in fact, welcome observation and comment from any member of the teaching staff, at any time. A standing writing-lab committee in the English department can help focus these comments. Several respondents pointed out that it is also helpful to have tutors visit each freshman English section at the beginning of the term to explain the goals and procedures of the lab.

Such mutual exchanges not only enable the lab to continue to improve its methods and its services, but they also allow faculty members to feel confident of the quality of instruction the labs offer. All of the lab's resources—books, exercises, supplementary assignments, self-help materials—should be freely available to teachers for consultation. Some labs have more space to store this kind of thing than the freshman program's director has. A few respondents report such success in this aspect of their lab program that they have to keep developing fresh materials because of piracy on the part of the instructional staff!

Finally, the writing lab director must assume responsibility for full and on-going communication not only between the writing lab and the English department, but also between the lab and the rest of the institution. One respondent reports her most serious problem was the equation of good writing with good

grammar, and of teaching writing with teaching grammar, by faculty in other disciplines. There is no better way to avoid misunderstanding of the lab's role than reminders of how the lab helps students—and perhaps more important, what it does not or cannot do. Devices for this include tours of the lab, classroom visits by tutors, occasional meetings or open houses for lab and instructional staffs. Keeping up regular contacts is one of two essential ways to dispel fears that the tutors are less than competent, that tutors are writing the students' papers, or that tutors are in any way undercutting the relationship between students and their classroom teachers.

The other essential way is, of course, to deliver the goods: to do our job in such a way that students and faculty see an improvement in the writing of students who are faithful in their attendance at the lab and who work to follow tutors' suggestions.

A writing lab's effectiveness reaches far beyond students in a freshman English course, and all these suggestions can be applied to establish and maintain a good working relationship between the lab and all departments of the entire institution. Understanding and cooperation strengthen the lab and, more importantly, also provide maximum educational opportunity for the students.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Using the *Writing Lab Directory* compiled by Muriel Harris and her colleagues at Purdue University, I selected 25 labs across the country. Because my initial curiosity was piqued by wondering whether other lab directors had problems similar to those I was encountering, I chose institutions in which the writing labs seemed to be connected with English departments. As it turned out, two of my respondents reported that their labs are not connected to the English department. One of these directs a purely remedial lab and the other, a lab that is part of a department of freshman writing separate from the English department. Fifteen of the 25 directors responded, all generously, some by sending me supporting materials: full descriptions of their programs, copies of forms that they use for referrals, samples of fliers, even handbooks for tutors. My thanks are due to all of them.

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of brevity this article indicates that the main role of the writing lab is as adjunct to a freshman English program, and that the only faculty we deal with are English teachers. In fact, the responses to my questionnaire make clear the labs' increasingly wider range in helping students in all disciplines and at all college levels—a trend I heartily endorse. I also refer to the staff of a writing lab as tutors, although in many cases the tutoring is done by graduate teaching assistants or peer tutors.