

The view from the writing lab: Another way to evaluate a writing program

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The assessment of writing programs is usually based on some means of evaluating the proficiency of students' writing, on the report of outside reviewers, or on student evaluations of classroom teaching. While these may all be necessary and useful, there is also another less quantifiable way to peer into the depths of a writing program. To see what is really going on in all those classrooms up and down the corridor, a writing program administrator can spend a few hours in the program's writing lab.

This visit will not soothe the savage provost who demands statistical evidence of minimum competence, nor will it stave off a dean intent on proving the program is cost-effective. But it will offer a way to look at some aspects of writing programs that are rarely available for public view. Most labs do not merely reflect the quality of the program they serve. They reflect, in an intensified and heightened form, its characteristic traits. After listening in on tutor-student conferences and watching the operation of the lab, the director of a writing program can gather useful insights into the program's real standards and goals; the degree of consistency from one section to another of a writing course; the extent to which classroom teachers are involved with their students' progress; the manner of that involvement; and the degree of their own improvement as teachers. All that is needed to gather this information is patience and a set of questions to ask oneself while observing what's going on. For those with a few hours to spare and a lab to spend them in, the following questions can lead to unexpected insights.

What kinds of help is the writing lab providing? In a strong composition program there is a commitment to teach writing to every student in every composition course and not merely to shuffle them routinely through the semester. Thus, though the lab staff will spend part of their time with students from basic or remedial courses, they should also be working with students in the regular course sequence who need extra instruction. These are the students who need help to fill gaps where the rest of their classmates are reasonably proficient. Often, such students are potentially good writers with only a few weaknesses. But their teachers cannot afford to devote class time to problems that only concern a few students. Since acquiring writing skills is not a sequential act, it is very likely that most classes of average writers will include one or two students who have difficulty, for example, with spelling. Another student or two will get locked into a single-sentence pattern that goes on relentlessly, page after page. Still another, terrorized in the dim, dark past by some nameless, faceless, well-meaning high

school teacher, inserts commas after every third word. There are always several students who, at first, need inordinate amounts of help to generate ideas. And occasionally a student, sometimes an older person returning to the classroom after an absence of several years, is traumatized by once again having to produce academic prose. The student might be either unable to start writing or troubled in at least four ways about the first two sentences he or she has written. And so on. The list is as varied as the problems that confront writers. Yet classroom teachers cannot add on all the extra hours needed to give these students individualized help. A center for supplementary, personalized instruction is ideally suited to do just that.

If diversity characterizes the kinds of problems student writers have, then diversity of lab instruction also indicates a well-rounded program in which teachers are concerned with a full spectrum of writing skills when they grade papers. An observer strolling through the writing lab ought to hear a great variety of topics being discussed. While one tutor and student are working on pronouns, another pair may be discussing revision strategies. Apostrophe rules may be the subject of still another tutorial session, or perhaps the topic is invention strategies or the use of transitions. Variety is the key here because when teacher recommendations and student requests consistently focus tutorial sessions on only one aspect of writing, such as the elimination of grammatical error, the program will be lopsided in its emphasis. Equally off-balance is a program where students from composition courses rarely appear in the lab to review punctuation rules or learn how to proofread for spelling errors. Instead, there should be a potpourri of discussions on grammar and mechanics, on composing processes, on rhetorical matters, on vocabulary and word choice, on footnote format—in short, on all the matters that concern writers learning to write.

Yet a diversity of topics for instruction is not all that characterizes a healthy writing lab program. The subjects for discussion must also focus on *relevant* writing concerns, not simply provide band-aid kinds of help to appease the teacher or calm the student. For example, lab sessions should be spent probing for writing topics that engage the student's interest, but should not be spent frantically searching for what will "please the teacher." Tutors may need to help students learn how to gather their thoughts on a reading assignment, but they should not help the student to guess what some particular teacher wants the essay to say. Tutors may also need to help students understand criticism of their writing, but ought not to be continually counseling students who were crushed by harsh or degrading comments on their papers. What the eavesdropping observer ought to hear, then, are tutorial discussions on a wide range of topics relevant to useful and appropriate writing instruction.

On what basis do tutors decide which skills to work on with students? One of the major needs of a composition program is a clearly articulated set of standards and goals, a hierarchy of skills to be mastered, or some general sense of direction based on a discernible philosophy of composition. Whether or not there is a common syllabus from one classroom to the next, the lab tutor ought to have some sense of these goals, and each student ought to have some assessment of how his or her writing stacks up against the program's criteria for effective writing. When teachers carry the program's goals into their classrooms, they will do so in part by indicating clearly to each student what the student's writing strengths and

weaknesses are. In the writing lab, this means that students know what they need to work on, that their need matches a deficiency that is evident in their writing, and that there is a relative consistency from classroom to classroom about what constitutes major writing deficiencies.

When all is working well, a student who appears in the lab will be able to inform the tutor, with a teacher's referral sheet, comments on a graded paper, or an oral explanation, what it is they should focus on. Even the statement, "My teacher says I need to use more specific details and examples in my papers" will give the lab session a useful sense of direction. If the paper the student has brought along does lack concreteness, the tutor and student can plunge in efficiently. An effective partnership among teacher, student, and tutor has been established. But when students do not know what they want to work on or make incorrect guesses, then the teacher may not have given clear guidance or established specific goals for writing proficiency. The tutor and student will then flounder around trying to guess why the paper in front of them got a C or D. The student will try to guess which of the teacher's comments to attend to or will suggest a writing problem that isn't evident in the paper. Without a sense of what the program is trying to teach students, the tutor is equally lost. How important are spelling errors? Are underdeveloped paragraphs something the tutor and student should deal with immediately in a first-semester course, or is that a topic normally discussed later? Should the tutor be teaching revision strategies to help students with problems in organization if the teachers' assignments are mainly in-class writing with which extensive revision is not possible? Should the tutor encourage the student who wants to try to write a science fiction story to fulfill an assignment in comparison/contrast writing, or should the tutor steer the writer into expository prose because that's what the program stresses? Smooth coordination and common assumptions shared by the program director, the teaching staff, the students, and the lab tutors will answer these questions when it is reasonably clear to everyone which writing skills are being taught, how important they are in assessing proficiency, and approximately when, or in which course, they are covered.

Writing labs often have itemized referral sheets for the teachers to use, and in a well-coordinated program, the administrator and writing lab director have hammered out the referral sheet together by agreeing on the items to be included. The lab director then knows that what he or she trains the tutor to teach is what the classroom teachers will be emphasizing as well. If the program stresses writing as a process, the tutor should be ready to help students with brainstorming techniques or other invention strategies. If the program places its major emphasis on some specific degree of proficiency in grammar and mechanics, then lab instructors should have a strong repertoire of instructional materials and strategies to teach the necessary rules and editing skills. If syntactic maturity is a major goal, then the lab ought to have a good supply of techniques and materials on sentence combining, sentence variety, and so on, to help students for whom classroom instruction is insufficient.

If there is consistency in standards from one class to another, this too is evident in the lab. When students enrolled in the second semester, or quarter, of a composition sequence come to the lab and seem to be victims confused by nonuniform criteria, then standards are clearly not consistent. One symptom of this inconsistency is a lab overflowing with students enrolled in the second course

who are suddenly asked to accept, from different teachers, very different assessments of their overall competency in writing. When a student staggers into the lab with a D or F on the first paper of the second writing course in a sequence and tells the tutor that he or she got As and Bs in the first course, disparity in standards is a distinct possibility.

The size of the program and the program director's own standards will determine whether five or 50 of such students are accurate indicators of a real problem of grading consistency. The program administrator observing in the lab also ought to be listening for students who voice their confusion about different rationales for high and low grades. Typical of such a problem is the student who confronts a tutor, with failing paper in hand, and says in tones of righteous indignation, "See, last quarter we were graded on our *ideas*, not mechanics." If the "ideas" in the paper are unfocused, undeveloped, or disorganized, then the student hasn't learned what constitutes effective writing and is in the lab for appropriate reasons. But if the student has focused his or her energies on only one aspect of writing while ignoring other skills, then there is indeed a problem. Another typical example of inconsistency is the student who explains that he or she was graded for "originality" last semester and seems bewildered by this semester's low grade. If this student's paper is a reasonably creative, but otherwise inadequate piece of writing, this may indicate that the program administrator has a problem of nonuniformity of goals to tend to. But again, it is the administrator's decision as to how many of these students indicate a real symptom of inconsistency across the program.

Do teachers follow the progress of their students who attend the lab? The answer to this question will indicate something about the extra effort, the conscientiousness, and the concern for the student's improvement that is prevalent in a program. Some teachers will remain only a name on a referral slip; others will become close co-workers with the lab staff because they feel the need to be actively involved with what their students are doing. The teacher who works with a tutor, making suggestions for areas of study and watching for subsequent improvement in the student's writing, expends both time and energy, two commodities in short supply when people teach writing.

But time-consuming as it is to teach an entire class and to structure supplementary instruction for certain students, some teachers do all this and still manage to check in occasionally with the lab tutor and read over the lab folders to see what their students are doing. These conscientious teachers add a great deal to their students' learning by this interaction. The motivation they provide for the student to keep on working is enormous. When a student has labored long and hard with a lab tutor on the complexities of sentence fragments, there is no reward or incentive to continue working quite like the teacher's comment on the next paper that pays tribute to the reduced number of fragments. By contrast, teachers who consider their jobs done when they instruct students to go down the hall to the lab where "they" will help are on the verge of abandoning the student and relinquishing responsibility for the student's learning. The unspoken message to the student is that such work isn't very important anyway.

There are several ways to observe the degree to which teachers are involved in the supplementary instruction of their students. In most labs, records are kept for every student, and the observer can note how frequently each teacher comes to

the lab to check students' folders or talk with the tutors. Or tutors can be observed talking on the phone or going down the hall to the teachers' offices. Listening to the first few minutes of tutorial sessions, the observer can also acquire evidence of the degree of the teachers' involvement. When tutors and their students meet, they often spend the first few minutes reestablishing contact, filling each other in on what has happened since their last meeting or planning for what they'll do next. Some students begin by sharing with the tutor a paper that has been returned to them since the last session. "My teacher said that now I'm really learning how to use transitions in this paper," or "My instructor wrote on the paper that I should keep working with you on how to narrow a topic." Such comments are a clear indication that the teacher is aware of the student's lab work. Or the lab tutor might suggest the agenda for the session by saying, "I saw your instructor a few days ago, and he thinks we ought to go over paragraph development in that antiabortion paper you handed in last week," or "I got a note from your teacher, and your spelling is really improving. She said she'd talk with you about what we should work on next." These comments are overt signs of an effective and active partnership between lab and classroom.

Finally, the observer can also look for signs of teachers actively encouraging student use of the lab. In some programs, teachers bring their classes in for a tour of the lab at the beginning of the semester.¹ Other labs post weekly lists of the names of students who have worked in the lab that week.² Teachers who expend effort in encouraging their students to seek supplementary instruction will thus be seen touring the lab with their classes or checking attendance lists or trying other methods that demonstrate their interest.

Is the lab being used as a resource place for teachers as well as students? In most programs, composition courses are taught by a variety of people, many of whom cannot or are not willing to spend the time and money necessary to keep up with journals, conferences, and research in the field of writing. Yet the continued success of a writing program depends on the professional vitality of its staff. If teaching composition is to be generally thought of as a lively art throughout the program, then there has to be a focal point, a resource place, where journals and books are easily accessible. The library could serve this purpose except that it is primarily a place to study and a repository for permanent materials, not the handouts, topic assignments, conference announcements, and new textbooks that are part of the teaching of writing. Composition as a field is so pedagogically oriented that the teaching staff needs access to a variety of teaching materials as well as books and articles. The faculty lounge or cafeteria might also do, but the needed resources would have to be brought in and tended.

But writing labs are talking places anyway. And most labs have a variety of resources close at hand. Materials are continually being created and/or collected to use in teaching and in training tutors. Writing labs are places that bring together teaching and learning to teach, good talk and ready reference. They serve as excellent resource rooms for faculty.³ It is a sign of health in a writing program if its lab cultivates interest in its collection of books and materials by the rest of the composition staff. Thus in a composition program where there is a genuine interest in avoiding the same old tired syllabus from semester to semester, the resource section of the writing lab will be humming with activity—teachers reading books, checking out journals, borrowing copies of the lab's home-grown

materials, and depositing copies of their handouts and exercises to share with others.

Is the lab being used by students other than those in freshman composition courses? If a writing program is known around campus for purveying nothing more than a timeserving semester or two in freshman composition, there will be few, if any, requests for continued assistance with writing. Students who heave a sigh of relief when completing freshman composition won't even consider returning for help with term papers, reports, essay exams, or résumés. On the other hand, programs that have earned respect among both students and faculty, and whose composition teachers have convinced their students of the importance of writing well and of the need to continue expending effort on improving writing skills, will continue to receive requests for help. One purpose of a lab—the flexible arm of a writing program—is to provide instruction beyond the traditional classroom. Where the composition program has generated interest in writing in other disciplines, and has provided assistance in developing writing-across-the-curriculum activities, the lab will be offered *and* used as the writing program's support system for the rest of the campus. If the development of effective writing skills is a lively and ongoing concern of the whole campus, students will come to the lab for help with a variety of writing assignments in other courses.⁴

Because many labs reach out enthusiastically and easily to serve campus-wide needs, the lab may also offer a variety of additional programs: workshops for clerical staff, review sessions for graduate school and job applications, conferences and short courses for the community, and so on.⁵ The observer ought to examine these programs to see whether there is any involvement or assistance by other members of the composition staff or whether the lab staff is left on its own. Is the writing program working hand in hand to assist the lab in delivering the message that writing skills are important and that writing improvement is an ongoing part of everyone's education?

For the observer looking at a writing program through the lens of its writing lab, the questions offered here may lead to still more questions, depending on what is observed. But in the long run, the questions are of less interest than the answers, and the answers are perhaps of even less interest than the solutions.

The solutions are likely to be of special value to the program because the view from the lab reveals the effect of classroom instruction in its most keenly felt and personal form. When the observer sees that students who are intent upon learning how to become better writers are being sent to the lab for that purpose by concerned teachers, then the program that lab is a part of is obviously flourishing. If work in the lab is perfunctory and timeserving, then the odds are great that the whole program is equally perfunctory and timeserving. If writing lab tutors are merely crisis interventionists and caterers to the ambulatory wounded, then there is a high probability that, whatever the writing program as a whole may look like on paper or in the breathless hopes of administrative personnel, that program is a shambles.

A final caution. Even when the lab and program are relatively healthy, there is a type of weakness that can be debilitating both to the lab and to the writing program and that may produce negative answers to every question the observer may ask. That weakness is the lack of integration between the lab and the program it is

nominally part of. Integration of lab and program is a key to the success of both, not only because they reinforce each other but because they must work together as the scope of writing programs widens. Today, writing instruction is spreading rapidly beyond English and composition-program classrooms. The advent of writing-across-the-curriculum and of core-curriculum programs with a writing requirement calls upon faculty members who teach content courses in every field to take responsibility for the quality of student writing. As a result, writing program administrators—those who run tutorial centers and those who run the larger programs encompassing those centers—must take responsibility for integrating an enormous variety of values, aims, and anxieties. Only a clear, practical understanding by all faculty of the appropriate uses and limitations of the writing lab, and conversely a clear, practical understanding by the lab administrator of the goals of the faculty at large, can make a college-wide writing program truly effective.

Notes

¹ Irene Lurkis Clark, "Integrating Lab and Classroom at a Large University," *Writing Lab Newsletter*, 5 (March 1981), 3-4.

² Lorraine Perkins, "Encouraging Student Attendance," *Writing Lab Newsletter*, 5 (June 1981), 7-8.

³ Muriel Harris, "Making the Writing Lab an Instructor's Resource Room," *College Composition and Communication*, 28 (December 1977), 376-78.

⁴ Kate Hymes, "Interdisciplinary Programs and the Writing Lab: The Evolution of a College Writing Lab," *Writing Lab Newsletter*, 5 (January 1981), 5-7; Susan P. Robbins and Mary C. Grattan, "The Role of Writing Centers in Writing Across the Curriculum Programs," *Writing Lab Newsletter* (forthcoming).

⁵ Muriel Harris and Kathleen Blake Yancey, "Beyond Freshman Composition: Other Uses of the Writing Lab," *Writing Center Journal*, 1 (Fall/Winter 1980), 43-49; Willa Wolcott, "A Writing Center Reaches Out," *Writing Lab Newsletter*, 5 (May 1981), 7-9.