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Beyond Freshman Comp: Expanded Uses of the Writing Lab

Muriel Harris and Kathleen Blake Yancey

A. Identifying Needs and Recycling Resources: M. Harris

Though most freshmen may not believe it, there is life after freshman comp—and even some writing to be done. Although the first mission of a new writing lab is usually to supplement or to be integrated into the freshman writing course, labs have begun to respond as well to the needs of writers throughout their years at college. Labs have and should expand to meet these needs because they are uniquely capable of doing so. It is the flexibility and the attention to individualized needs, basic features which distinguish labs from classrooms, that encourage and promote this growth.

Adaptability, the ease with which change can occur, is the first crucial element. Because it offers a flexible form of writing instruction, a lab can respond promptly and easily to meet writing needs without waiting for the slow creaking of administrative machinery. Labs can launch in new directions, try new services, and readjust to fit new needs. They are able to offer varied amounts of help and to respond to single requests. That is, they can conform to fit the shape of the need, whereas traditional instruction comes packaged in a course, complete with a syllabus and reading list, which may have taken six months to a year to become a reality. This is particularly true of interdisciplinary efforts. Courses in other fields which incorporate some writing can get stalled in the planning stage or meet up with administrative roadblocks, but the lab's door is open for immediate instruction. In a lab, when a trial run of one approach proves unsuccessful, trying another one should be relatively easy, especially when quick and direct feedback has indicated the source of the difficulty with the first approach. Some call this formative evaluation;

writing lab people call it adapting to fit the need.

While the ease with which labs can grow is the working principle behind their expansion, the pedagogical reason is even more compelling. Labs should expand because they are needed by other writers in addition to freshman composition students. Since we all know that learning to write is a life-long process, we who teach in writing labs can hardly sit back and say our job is done when our students pass freshman comp. Some writing skills were mastered there, but need finer honing. Other skills may still need considerable work. And new skills become needed for more complex kinds of writing. The attention to individualized needs in the tutorial is clearly efficient and effective in meeting those varied needs.

Our purpose here, however, is not to argue for expanding labs; that is already happening. What we wish to offer instead are suggestions, first, for identifying some of those writing needs beyond freshman composition that labs can assist with and second, for implementing instruction to meet those needs. And, as will be indicated, this is often a matter of recycling in a slightly different form what we already teach and calling upon resources we may already have available in our labs. As an extended example of the organic nature of this expansion, the second section of this paper describes the process Kathleen Blake Yancey went through in identifying and responding to the needs of Purdue students preparing for the verbal skills portion of the Law School Aptitude Test (LSAT) and the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT). Though the details and subject matter will change from one lab to another, it is the process she went through that may serve as a useful guide for others.

To begin the process of identifying various writing needs, we need several perspectives from which to consider what we can offer the writer: our own vantage point as lab people, the view of other teachers, and the student's perspective. First, as writing lab instructors, we have the unique capacity to look from the inside out. That is, we know what's available in our own facility and need only ask ourselves who else in addition to freshman writers can profit from what we have on our bookshelves, in our cabinet drawers, and in our heads. What services do we offer that we can revise for different audiences and/or in different forms? One example is the mini-course (or "workshop" or "review session"), those one-hour short courses on popular or standard topics that many labs offer as small group work in addition to their tutorial instruction.

After these mini-courses are offered several times, they usually become carefully planned intensive sessions in which irrelevant or useless material is discarded. If not "master sessions," they are at least pared down to what is really effective. The question then becomes one of finding the students who would profit from them. Obviously, students in

freshman writing courses will be interested, but announcing that these mini-courses are open to everyone in the college or university who is interested will also attract other audiences as well. Informal conversations with faculty members in other departments may also help to locate teachers who would welcome these mini-courses as one or two of the class hours in their courses. Other audiences might include local businesses where there are employee training sessions, high school teachers who gather together at in-service training sessions, and/or adult education groups in the community. Locating appropriate groups for those well-structured one-hour sessions is often a matter of looking afresh at what is around us.

At Purdue, we found yet another new audience for our mini-courses fairly close to home, in fact just down the hall in the freshman composition classrooms. When several of the composition teachers began sending their whole class to a mini-course, we realized that we had overlooked a very real possibility, a way to integrate the lab more closely into the freshman program, by offering to teach our mini-courses as "Traveling Teacher" sessions in writing classes when we are invited to do so. This Traveling Teacher program offers the classroom teacher the opportunity to provide the class with a change of pace and with another teacher's perspective on a topic. If the classroom teacher is fairly new, there is also the chance to observe another teacher in action. None of these advantages occurred to us initially, but they became obvious as the Traveling Teacher program grew. The point, however, is that the program was begun in response to what we saw as a problem with our mini-courses, i.e., whole classes being sent to our small group sessions. Problems can sometimes be the beginnings of different solutions.

As lab people looking outward from our labs, we can also see that our labs have a great deal of material and potential data to offer people interested in doing research in writing, with instructional materials, or with pedagogical techniques. Labs are a vast, wealthy storehouse of data, and we can either make use of what we have for our own research, or we can invite our colleagues from departments of education, linguistics, psychology, and communications to come in and observe, record, or study the results of what we do. Students might also want to use our facilities for their own research. At Purdue, students have written reports and term papers on the lab's publicity techniques, on the effectiveness of the lab's various modes of instruction, on the correlation between tutorial instruction and the ability to pass writing proficiency requirements at the university, and so on. Moreover, when our lab was in need of a slide presentation, graduate students in media science learning how to develop multi-media programs were able to help us while learning in their own field. The point is that labs can serve not only writers learning how to write but also students learning how to do research, how to

study the operations of different facilities, how to develop materials, and so on. These other audiences are not likely to seek us out; therefore, we need to learn how to recognize the resources we can offer.

While the projects and programs described above are some that can be identified by people inside the lab, we also need to invite other teachers to tell us their needs, needs we may not have perceived. At Purdue, we were told that our instructional materials and resources, geared to general concerns of writing, did not sufficiently overlap with the more specialized needs of students in business writing courses. Thus was born our business writing component, or (depending on your perspective) the lab component for the business writing program. After a year of intensive work by people familiar with both the lab and the business writing program, the lab is now stocked with materials and tutorial help more closely tailored to their needs. The tutors who work with business writing students have handouts and exercises on standard grammar but with examples from the business world, and they have specialized materials on the concepts of audience, voice, format, tone, etc. in relation to business writing. In addition, there are resource shelves with specialized books, samples of various forms of business communication, and format manuals.¹ Though we may argue the point, the perception of other teachers may be that all writers and writers in all writing courses do not share exactly the same concerns. If students in advanced composition courses are not regularly using the lab, then we need to have those teachers explain their needs to us. Moreover, beyond the English department there may well be still other teachers who are potential users of the lab, but not in its present form. Again, we need to hear their perceptions of their needs, and it may be that those needs are somewhat different from what we'd suggest from our vantage point looking outward.

Students who have come to the lab for reasons other than improving essays or term papers are also an excellent source of suggestions for how and where to expand the lab's services. They may come in looking for help with letters of application to employers or with essays that need to accompany applications to graduate or professional schools. English education majors may express the need to review grammar or may want practical experience in tutoring or a close look at how a lab functions.² Creative writers may want a reader for their poems, short stories, or novels while reporters on the college newspaper may be in need of a place which answers a quick question on grammar or a longer question on how to overcome wordiness. Older students returning to school may need some feedback on whether their writing is at a level acceptable for college work; younger writers, as Thom Hawkins suggests, may need extended conversations with peer tutors when learning how to use academic language in their writing.³ Students in foreign language courses may need to learn what the subjunctive is or how to identify a relative pronoun.

Such lists could continue on indefinitely because throughout the campus students are working with language in written form, and with very little extra effort we can offer them appropriate instruction.

One example of recycling materials and services has already been mentioned, the mini-course as a “Traveling Teacher” session, but other possibilities exist. All the materials used to train tutors to teach writing can be offered as a resource to teachers on the composition staff, and a useful resource library in the lab for the composition staff can also include files of topic assignments other teachers have used successfully, shelves of journals which focus on the teaching of writing, and also files of sample graded papers (donated by teachers at the end of the semester when they are wondering what to do with those left-over unclaimed papers—a classic example of recycling). Labs which have cabinets full of homegrown handouts and exercises can offer them to classroom teachers too, and the endless stream of diagnostic tests which accompany texts from major publishers can be put in yet another file for teachers to browse through. The point here is that a lab has quantities of valuable material which, when collected and made accessible in the form of a resource library for teachers, makes the room a writing center for teachers as well as students.⁴ Similarly, lab materials ought to serve as a resource for local high school teachers and for people in other institutions seeking help in starting their own labs.

Making the lab’s handouts, format and style books, dictionaries, lists of topic suggestions, samples of resumes and job application letters, etc. available to students makes the lab a resource room for them as well. In addition, the stacks of publishers’ samples of grammar handbooks, rhetorics, and workbooks that most labs seem to collect can be turned into a library of books that students can browse through and/or check out. When the instructor’s manuals with answer keys are stapled into the workbooks, they become a self-instruction book that can be taken home. For students unable to spend much time in the lab, this is a valuable means of offering additional instruction. It is also a useful service because the main library on campus rarely stacks even a sampling of the variety of books on writing that exist. The vast diversity of texts and their differing emphases, theoretical bases, topics, types of information, and methods of instruction are thus unavailable to students—unless the lab has a way of making them accessible. Where there are advanced undergraduate or graduate-level courses in the teaching of writing, this library is also an excellent resource for student papers which review, sample, or compare various approaches to the teaching of writing. With such a library the lab thus serves the needs of the student learning to teach writing as well as the student learning to write.

Identifying these different audiences and differing writing needs is indeed a constant process, one of re-evaluating, changing directions,

gathering new perspectives, and finding solutions to vague problems. It is also a flexible process, but not an amorphous one, as evident in the structure behind the process described in the following example.

B. Identifying and Responding to a New Student

Population: An Exemplar:

Kathleen Blake Yancey

Three years ago our Writing Lab did not help students who were preparing for either the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) or the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT). Yet both the LSAT and the GMAT include tests of verbal ability. In contrast, today we annually help over 100 students preparing for these tests. The saga of how this growth occurred illustrates nicely how writing lab staffs can both identify and meet the needs of writers who have moved beyond freshman comp.

Our interest in the LSAT and the GMAT started with a student who dropped into the lab for help with a test about which I knew nothing, the LSAT. Fortunately for each of us, he did have with him a booklet that explained the test, clarified its components, and included sample questions, all of which even had answers.⁵ A quick review of this booklet indicated that on the LSAT, writing ability, as is so often the case, is measured *via* multiple-choice questions. By and large, these questions (in the verbal portions of a test) require a thorough grounding in grammar and usage. Consequently, that summer the student and I worked on sentence structure, pronoun agreement, and the like, using handouts designed for the freshmen.

The saga could have been contained in only this short episode. One student needed specialized help and received same: we simply used materials that were already available. But it also seemed possible that I had unwittingly stumbled upon a need common to more than one person. In short, maybe other students needed the same, or similar, kinds of help.

To test this assumption, I designed a 50-minute mini-course to be offered during the following autumn. To be sure, I could have acted more judiciously by contacting the pre-law counselors and/or by polling the appropriate students in advance in order to determine their perceptions of the need for such a mini-course.⁶ But in this situation we thought it best to use the more direct, “take the plunge” method: in this way, we could quickly and easily determine, by way of the mini-course as a trial run, whether or not a larger need existed. Little time was invested in setting the mini-course up, and at worst, not a single student would appear.

At best, however, we could immediately introduce some students to the lab and the ways it could help them prepare now for the verbal portions of the LSAT.

An introduction to the lab's services composed the basis of that trial-run mini-course since little else could be accomplished in the fifty minutes. This introduction was itself divided into three major parts. The first involved sharing some tips (i.e., do's and don't's) on test-taking, with particular reference to the LSAT and the conventions governing it.⁷ The second part focused on the lab's resources: tapes, handouts, and books (or parts thereof) that would prove to be especially valuable to these students. Tutoring was also explained as an option. The third and last part centered on the students; they took a practice test that I had designed to simulate one of the types of tests on the LSAT. After taking this test, which (like the LSAT) is timed, we reviewed each item, not just to identify the correct and incorrect answers, but also to take note of the procedures involved in selecting the answers.

Even in order to set up such a seemingly simple mini-course, I did have to spend some time learning about the LSAT.⁸ Nonetheless, it was time well-spent. In the first place, I was re-assured to find that, like other English teachers, I have the skills required to help these students: an understanding of grammar, usage, diction, idiom, and verbosity; an ability to identify error by type; and an ability to correct error. Secondly, I was then equipped to select the specific materials that we already have on hand for these students to use. Third, I could then start to develop materials—often by recycling available materials—that more closely answer these students' needs.⁹

Preparation for the mini-course included one last process: notifying these hypothetical students and their counselors when and where the mini-course would occur.¹⁰ At the mini-course the hypothetical students materialized, and more of them materialized than there were seats in the room. Moreover, not all of these students planned to take the LSAT; some intended to take the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT). Alas, another test I knew nothing about!

The initial mini-course thus functioned in several important ways. First, it allowed the lab to contact students we could help immediately, those preparing for the LSAT. Second, it demonstrated that the need for this kind of help indeed existed; we might, then, further develop our resources in this area. Third, in attempting to help students taking the LSAT, we found students taking another test—and they too wanted help. The moral of this story is clear: in meeting one need, we often find others. The beauty of a lab in this context, of course, is its flexibility, its ability to respond when and where needed.

Moreover, while the story does have a moral, it doesn't properly have

an end. Rather, it continues as more and different needs become apparent, as tasks become completed, as types of help are no longer required. Again, our experience with the LSAT provides a case in point. The one 50-minute mini-course for pre-law students has grown to a set of four sessions offered twice a year and designed for both LSAT—and GMAT—preparation. The first session includes an introduction not unlike that presented in the initial mini-course, and each of the following three sessions centers on one type of practice test and review.

Evaluations—another part of this tale—showed that students wanted more help, so voluntary homework components were added. Future plans for these mini-courses include developing separate sets of mini-courses for LSAT and GMAT preparation since the needs of the students preparing for these are not identical.

The story also would not be complete without some mention of how these same students can be helped outside of the mini-course structure. Through taking and reviewing the practice tests, they can see where their understanding of certain principles—for example, dangling modifiers—is deficient. With this information, they can better take advantage of the lab's handouts and tapes. Some of them need more intensive help and begin tutorials. Others will experience little difficulty in identifying and correcting the errors, but need—and want—help in learning to become better writers. They too often begin tutorials. Later, still others want help in completing the applications to law schools, and they are more likely to seek it now that they have a “contact” in the lab. So this saga continues to continue.

The process of expansion, as illustrated by our interest in the LSAT, is not willy-nilly, but its growth is highly dynamic, organic in nature. It proceeds from the needs we as lab people recognize—or stumble on—and it proceeds from the needs recognized by others—teachers and students. Expansion can take a variety of forms, and these too can change through time. At first, expansion may not even mandate new materials: when new materials are necessary, often they find roots in the old. Thus, labs are by nature—through their built-in capacity for individualization—prepared to expand. Or to put the same point in another way, labs are prepared to help writers who have moved beyond freshman comp.

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- ¹Myron D. Yeager, “Developing the Business Writing Lab as an Adjunct to Classroom Instruction,” ABCA Midwest Regional Conference, Valparaiso, Indiana, April 11, 1980.
- ²Joyce Anderson West, “The Writing Lab: An Undergraduate’s Viewpoint,” *Writing Lab Newsletter*, IV, 8 (April 1980), 2-3.
- ³“Intimacy and Audience: The Relationship Between Revision and the Social Dimension of Peer Tutoring,” to be published in *College English*.

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

*The booklet referred to is simply that provided by ETS with the test application form. Included in the booklet are sample questions (with answers that are explained) and short sample tests. Also available are several commercial books designed to prepare students for the LSAT: one is that in the Arco Professional Career Examination Series (219 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10003).

*In fact, these approaches—including surveying both teachers and students—can be used with success. Regularly we survey teachers of freshman comp, for instance, to discover what needs they anticipate, such that we can tailor our mini-courses more precisely. The point here, then, is to use the approach that is suitable for the particular case.

*Although most of these conventions are mentioned in the explanatory booklet, too often students fail to understand their significance. The scoring system employed by the LSAT exemplifies this notion well. Since no points are subtracted for wrong answers, there is no penalty for guessing. Thus, students are advised to answer *every* question. Other conventions that receive emphasis are the definitions employed by the LSAT (i.e., what they do *and* do not include) as well as general advice about test-taking (e.g., getting sufficient sleep the night before the test).

*Taking the appropriate sample tests provided in the LSAT booklet (apart from taking the LSAT itself, an idea we are presently exploring) and analyzing them for type of error is the best way to understand the skills necessary to pass this portion of the test.

*The verbal tests are three: error recognition, usage, and sentence correction. The first two are self-explanatory, and the third primarily so: the student must choose the best of five possible sentences. In order to score well on these tests, students need to be able to read carefully but quickly, to identify error and type of error (as defined by the LSAT), and in one test to correct error. These are skills that many of our materials are intended to develop. In refining these materials for LSAT use, I generally used more sophisticated examples in an attempt to have our practice exercises reflect the level of difficulty displayed by the LSAT.

*Publicity took the standard forms: sending memos to appropriate counselors and teachers, displaying posters, running notices in the campus newspaper, and the like.

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