

1-1-1982

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Recommended Citation

Harris, Muriel (1982) "Growing Pains: The Coming of Age of Writing Centers," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1, Article 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1053>

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Growing Pains: The Coming of Age of Writing Centers

Muriel Harris

For the Third Annual Meeting of the Writing Centers Association, which convened in May 1981, I was asked to offer an over-view of writing centers—their beginnings, growth, present status, and so on. That in itself is a sign of writing centers having come of age, since some of our young 'uns are apparently curious about our past. Interestingly enough, that past, those dim, dark beginnings in the primordial ooze, are really relatively recent; for if we've matured, it's been a rapid maturation process. In the "Editor's Notes" to a new book of essays on writing centers, Thom Hawkins and Phyllis Brooks conclude that it is doubtful that even a dozen writing centers existed at the beginning of the 1970's. Tapping several sources, they estimate that as we entered the 1980's, the number of writing centers nationwide was rapidly approaching 1000.¹

To describe that rapid growth process, I need to delve into some personal history because my case is typical of many. In the mid '70s, having decided that I was ready to look for a job, I finally found out what everyone else already knew, that there was little or no market for people who had degrees in literary studies. However, like other faculty wives and unemployed Ph.D's across the country, I began to teach composition as a part-time lecturer and quickly experienced the frustration of being unable to accomplish much of anything with a large group. There were murmurings of starting up a writing lab at Purdue which, like other post-secondary institutions around the country, was beginning to find that the literary crisis was not a media invention or a fiction *Newsweek* made up for a juicy cover story. Something was needed to cure the problem, and a "lab" sounded like a distinct possibility, though no one—at least at Purdue—knew exactly what a lab might be.



Fortunately, that didn't stop anyone from proceeding. Assuming that someone, somewhere, knew what a lab was, I went along to the 4C's that year.

At that 4C's, we combed the program for presentations on writing labs and found a few that looked promising, but they turned out to be vague, comforting words of encouragement for anyone interested in teaching one-on-one outside the traditional classroom setting. We heard profundities like "help the student master what he's having difficulty with," "offer him or her a support system," and so on. No one, however, talked about how to set up a lab, what to teach, where to get materials, what kind of budget to ask for, where to get tutors, etc., etc., etc. Most of us went home realizing that it was up to us to figure out what we could do, given little or no money, no structure, no training, no materials, and too often, no words of encouragement from anyone but the students who began to trickle in. All across the country, people were busy re-inventing the wheel on their own campuses. Not that there weren't successful labs somewhere. It's just that the rest of us didn't know where. There was no organization, no network, no way to reach out from campus to campus to talk with each other. There were a sparse handful of journal articles, but no books to read. Slowly, as people began to share experiences at national meetings, a feeling of community arose. Sharing the need to trade ideas and suggestions about labs, I started the WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER a few years ago, with 60 other people at a 4C's Conference who wanted to stay in touch. Shortly afterwards, the 4C's began the Special Interest Sessions. Thus, in the last few years, there have been special sessions for labs, plus papers presented at regular sessions. Papers and workshops on writing centers at NCTE conferences, however, are still noticeably rare.

During the last few years, then, we've become a real growth industry. Let me illustrate this by running through what was accomplished in 1981. In March, the 4C's had a Special Interest Session on labs, plus talks in regular sessions; there was a Southeastern Writing Centers Conference in Alabama, in February; and the Third Annual Meeting of the Writing Centers Association was held in May. And more materials appeared in print as well. Jossey-Bass issued a paperback edited by Thom Hawkins and Phyllis Brooks, "Improving Writing Skills," one of a series entitled *New Directions for College Learning Assistance*. The essays in this collection debate the question of tutors vs. self-teaching materials, describe the dominant models for writing centers, offer insights into the use of peer tutors, and offer advice for administrators on how to innovate, how to evaluate, and so on. In addition, a book of ar-

ticles that I edited, intended to serve as a sourcebook for people in labs, entitled *Tutoring Writing*, went to press at Scott, Foresman. Several essays in this collection discuss the one-on-one process, what defines it, where it can usefully intercede in the composing process, and what some of its inherent problems are; other essays examine ways to diagnose writing problems, methods to train tutors, varieties of multimedia and self-instruction materials, ways to structure labs, how to keep records, publicize, and evaluate, and so on. In addition to these two books, the first to deal with a wide range of issues of interest to writing center people, the *Writing Center Journal* also began publication, and the WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER mailing list grew to over 1,000 names.

Information is indeed becoming public and accessible. Yet, it is only rarely that *College English*, *CCC*, or *English Journal* has an article focusing on the concerns of labs, and when they do, it's usually on peer tutoring. Even the Hawkins and Brooks book, "Improving Writing Skills," leans heavily to articles on peer tutoring and has a three-page bibliography of readings on peer collaboration.² Peer tutoring is indeed an integral part of many labs, and in *all* labs, we *all*tutor. But what about other vital aspects of teaching writing in a tutorial setting? What is individualized instruction in writing? Theoretically and practically, how does it differ from classroom instruction? How effective is it? What is best left to one-on-one teaching? Are self-teaching materials inherently worthwhile or merely cost reducers? What skills are best left to self-instruction? Can we diagnose writing difficulties not apparent or easily uncovered by teachers in the classroom? Are there new and better strategies we know about that we can offer classroom teachers? When we discuss these matters (and we have indeed begun to address ourselves to these issues in useful ways), we talk only to each other, within the confines of sessions or conferences on writing centers or between the pages of books, journals, and a newsletter for writing center people. Of course, we need to talk to each other and to learn from each other, but as we grow, we're going to have to talk also in ways that the rest of the world of composition teachers and scholars can overhear us and think about our unique contributions to the teaching of writing. Otherwise, we're left in the position of being thought of as not much more than "some extra help down the hall."

Where then are we? Born in confusion, of a need administrators recognized only reluctantly, organized and staffed by people untrained for the job, within composition programs where the rest of the teachers really don't yet understand what we do, we're still managing to become

part of the establishment—an awesome feat when you think about it! But without a theoretical framework or research to justify what we know at a gut level works—and works superbly well—we are and will remain precarious, for several reasons. First, labs are expensive and often don't generate those almighty credit hours which automatically validate the existence of any course in the catalog. If we don't evaluate or grade students in any way or require their presence, we know that we have the best possible teaching situation, yet that works against us at budget time. A frill is a frill is a frill. Thus, last year, tight-fisted administrators closed down the lab at Carnegie-Mellon, and a lab director in Maryland was worried by the dean's threat to have their learning center swallow up his writing lab as a "cost effective" way to eliminate duplication of effort and facilities. In a frenzy to keep costs low by limiting staff, and to hand over some of the responsibility for learning to students, some of us rely on self-instruction books, tapes, video and slide programs, and whatever. Yet, our humanist colleagues down the hall sniff at us with condescension. "Machines don't teach," they say, afraid that if anyone found out that machines might indeed aid in learning, they'd be out of jobs. On the other hand, we're told to stick to the basics and then are sneered at as "comma fixing stations."

Listen for a minute to the words of Stephen and Susan Judy. In their recently published book, one of the few available texts on the market for teachers of writing, they state:

We are disturbed by the number of remedial "laboratories" and "clinics" that are being established in schools and colleges in an attempt to solve the writing crisis. In our experience, remedial centers often heighten writing problems because of their stress on basics and drill. In one center we visited—admittedly an extreme situation—students found themselves being assigned to "learning stations" named after parts of speech—the Verb Center, the Noun Place, the Adjective Clinic—where, presumably, individual faults were corrected.... Few remedial centers offer help with the problems the student faces in day-to-day work. In fact, some centers prohibit the students from bringing course work into class. We suggest as an alternative, the HELP! center, dedicated to the proposition that any time a student needs or wants help with a particular writing assignment, he or she can get it. A HELP! center need not contain expensive skill labs, workbooks, or grammar worksheets. Rather, when students come to the center they should find tutors—paid faculty, paraprofessional aides, parent volunteers, or fellow students—who will provide them with support and guidance.³

I suspect that others share what I felt as I read that section of their book. Anger, resentment, and other less mentionable emotions surfac-

ed as I read someone's advice to do what I know many, if not most, of the vast majority of labs we are already doing. If the Judys were recluses recently arrived from a twenty-year stint in the hinterlands of the Australian outback, we could smile politely and ignore their caveats. Unfortunately, until recently, Stephen Judy served as editor of *English Journal*, the NCTE journal for high school teachers of English.

The Judys' view of how writing labs function raises a crucial question. Do we have an image problem? Inadequate PR? Frankly, I'd say that we do, and that's one of the reasons that even though we are coming of age, our existence is still precarious. Outside the lab too many people don't really know what we do or how we do it. Tirelessly, we try every semester to educate and re-educate the writing teachers in our departments. We write reports and gather evaluation statistics to please our administrators and department heads, but we don't really address the profession at large. Why? Perhaps because we're so busy doing what we should be doing in our labs that we haven't had sufficient time to pause, look around, gather our thoughts, and set them to paper. Maybe we're still just a bit too new on the scene and are just beginning to see where we are. Maybe we've needed some percolating time as some answers begin to dawn on us. Whatever the reason, we now need to start gathering our thoughts and focusing on our strengths. Why? To justify our existence to God, man, and the rest of the composition people out there. And it should help us to identify future needs as we continue to grow and mature.

One strength, apparent from our origins, is our flexibility. Not having any molds to work from, we began by trying to fill the needs of each of our institutions. Without credit or course structure, we are more adaptable. In the terminology of evaluation, we are always doing "formative evaluation," trying things out to see how they work and getting quick feedback, and we're quite willing to say always that there's probably a better way. "Let's change this," or "let's add that." Or, "that worked, let's do it again." All that "winging it," trial and error method, allows us to grow and expand, not ossify into rigid structures. Another, related strength is the instant and constant feedback we get. When a tutorial teaching strategy doesn't work, the student sitting next to us lets us know pretty quickly. Or we can ask a question and know by the answer whether we've helped that student to understand or to acquire new strategies or unlearn old habits... or whatever we are working on. We know fairly quickly when materials aren't effective, when teaching strategies succeed or fail, when our services are or are not adequate to meet the needs of our students and/or colleagues in the

department or elsewhere on campus. Compare this to the classroom setting in which the teacher has to wait until the next theme is turned in to see what works.

In short, we have an ideal teaching situation. In a non-threatening, non-evaluative setting where we are coaches and helpers, not graders, we work with students more receptive to learning. We hear their *real* questions and know their *real* concerns—and we share their real successes as well. And we try more realistic approaches too, working on only one thing at a time until that's mastered. We don't hit the student with fourteen assorted errors in grammar and mechanics listed in the margin and another whole bag of rhetorical problems described at the top or bottom of the paper. We can focus usefully on one thing at a time, a far more sensible approach anyway. Even more important, we work with only one student at a time and attend to his or her needs. Never do we have to say to ourselves that this student has to sit through what she doesn't need to hear, nor do we spend time on what she isn't yet ready to learn. We can take generalities and work with a writer until the writer sees how to use that generality in a specific situation, how to turn vague, abstract textbook concepts into useful working strategies that apply to that particular problem or that particular writing situation—or particular paper. Recently, I sat with a student as he stared helplessly at the teacher's comment, "write better, more well developed paragraphs." On the one hand, what else could the teacher have said? Should she have written a little mini-text at the bottom of the page explaining well-developed paragraphs? He had already, presumably, read the textbook. On the other hand, why write such a useless comment anyway? If he could have written better paragraphs, he would have. All he really got was an editor's rejection, not advice. But, together, he and I could go sentence by sentence through a paragraph, talking about what more could be said or needed to be said on the subject. Slowly, patiently, inefficiently, tutorial teaching gets where it's supposed to go. And tutor and student part as friends, a word of encouragement from the tutor and a nod of appreciation from the student. In short, we've got the best show in town, and we know it. It's not Nirvana—there are records to keep, students who don't show, budgets that don't stretch far enough, and teachers who defeat our students when we know they're trying. Still, it's a great way to teach.

But, do we know everything we need to know? Before we lapse into smugness, we need to pay attention to a warning issued by Steve North. In an article in the September, 1981 issue of the WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER, he challenges us to define for ourselves what we don't

yet know, and he spells out some absolutely crucial areas of our ignorance. What don't we know that we're going to have to know to survive? That may be an odd question for an essay on the growth of writing centers. Maybe what I'm suggesting is that we've come of age in being able to ask far more sophisticated questions. A few years ago, we stumbled through the corridors of hotels where 4C's meetings were being held, asking "What's a lab?" Now, Steve North suggests that we pose questions to ourselves such as the following: How do we identify, with and for our writers, the composing process they use now? How do we help them work back from their flawed products to the process in order to guess at what might be going wrong? How do we help our writers set goals for changes in that process? Those are far better questions than we could have asked several years ago. Moreover, only writing center people can really ask such questions and begin to gather answers to them.

And I have another question for writing centers as we come of age. What next? New labs are still being formed, and that obviously is part of our growth. So too are the professionals being trained in our labs as instructors. The graduate students with whom I work in our lab at Purdue awe me. They write materials, produce video-tape programs, structure mini-courses, give conference presentations, publish articles, write doctoral dissertations on writing and the composing process, etc. Much of what they've learned is "in-service training," a euphemism for "we didn't have time or the means to teach them what to do before they started doing it," but that's how all of us learned anyway. However, I do see down the road a group of professionals such as these people, able to bring informed judgments to what they do. Outside the lab, there are promising signs as well in the "writing across the curriculum" movement. This emphasis on writing in other disciplines, a pedagogically sound approach to the teaching of writing, requires the services and facilities of a writing center for students as they write in various courses. Without the support system of writing centers, campus-wide stress on writing falters. Labs should and are assisting in this, and it bodes well for writers and for writing centers that students continue to write and take an interest in their writing in coursework beyond freshman composition. Thus are we becoming centers for both remedial and advanced composition.

In addition, labs are also sprouting in high schools, and that is probably the most rapidly expanding area for writing centers at the moment. That bodes well for our future too. As students become used to having the support system of a lab in a high school and realize the need

for individualized help with their writing, they'll come to college, expecting to continue dropping in the lab when they need help. If good writing centers are established in the secondary school, we also won't have to expend our energies trying to overcome our image of the "bonehead place" where idiots, failures, and illiterates go (and, presumably, sit in Comma Corners or Noun Nooks). If a high school student comes to college aware that writing is not a group activity, that it is a process which can be discussed and improved, and that writers are therefore short-changed if they are kept in groups, with personal assistance and feedback only in a few sentences at the bottom of the page and a few conferences a semester, then labs will really have come of age. Imagine, for a moment, the first day of class in freshman composition courses across the country and the usual questions that are asked. "What's the grade based on in this course?" "How many papers do we have to do?" "Where do we get the textbooks?" "Where's the writing lab?" Then, indeed, we'll have come of age!

Footnotes

¹"Improving Writing Skills," eds. Thom Hawkins and Phyllis Brooks, *New Directions for College Learning Assistance*, No. 3 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981), p. vii.

²Pp. 41-43.

³*The Teaching of Writing* (New York: Wiley, 1981), pp. 74-75.

⁴"Us 'N Howie: The Shape of Our Ignorance," *Writing Lab Newsletter*, 6, No. 1 (September, 1981), 3-7.