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In a recent article in *The Writing Center Journal*, Muriel Harris suggests that writing laboratories have an "image problem":

> 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.[1]

She goes on to suggest that those of us who work in writing laboratories need to start gathering our thoughts and focusing on our strengths "to justify our existence to God, man, and the rest of the composition people out there."[2] And although I agree with her that we ought to gather our thoughts and focus on our strengths, I would also suggest that we make the problem of addressing "the profession at large" and justifying programs to "God, man, and the rest of the composition people out there" difficult when we explain and justify what we do and how we do it in ways that can be easily misinterpreted or deemed unimportant by those we seek to impress the most.

Implicit in Harris' comment—and many of the comments that appear later in this essay—is a view that what goes on in writing laboratories is necessarily different from *and* better than what goes on in writing classes in general, classes taught by "the profession at large"

and "the rest of the composition people out there." Later on in the same article, she comes back to the point:

> ...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 still trying. Still it's a great way to teach.[3]

There is, of course, a good reason for Harris to take such a self-congratulatory stance. She is, after all, writing about writing laboratories in general for an audience of writing laboratory personnel. The problem is that such comments can help to create unwarranted barriers between writing laboratories and composition programs.

It is fairly easy to point out how writing laboratories are better than classes operated in the spirit of prison camps—classes in which teachers lecture and make a few brief comments (in red) on students' papers and students go off to suck on bread soaked in water. On the other hand, many of the best things that go on in writing classes are not necessarily different or do not necessarily have to be different from the best that goes on in writing laboratories. Many of the teachers in our regular composition program spend long hours discussing papers one-on-one with their students—going over students' ideas, rough drafts, and rewrites long before the students turn in final drafts. Other teachers I know spend many class sessions helping students to learn how to evaluate each other's papers, helping them to gain confidence, helping them to become independent learners.

Perhaps even more important, teaching composition in a classroom can offer different kinds of *advantages* over teaching writing in a writing laboratory. In the classroom, teachers can assign paper topics and students can discuss ideas, share strategies, and compare final products to see how different students' approaches and ideas lead to different products. In small groups, students can help each other discover ideas, recognize strategies, and evaluate each other's work. Indeed, students in a classroom setting can be encouraged to help each other both in class and out—a major step in helping them become independent of both writing teachers and writing laboratories.

Finally, having experience in both the classroom and in the writing laboratory, I am convinced that different students thrive on different approaches to teaching. There are students who need the immmediate feedback, constant support, and one-to-one attention that a writing laboratory offers. On the other hand, there are students who do *not* need or want such support—who prefer to work independently or with

a minimum of interaction with their teachers. Such students often like the independence they get in the classroom and view one-to-one tutoring as some form of mothering.[4]

The problem, then, is that while writing laboratories may operate differently—may possibly employ more one-to-one conferences, perhaps even more personalized support—we cannot claim that the difference is *necessarily* an improvement over what teachers do in the classroom. At best, we can claim that writing laboratories can *supplement* classroom instruction by giving more intense, individualied help *when needed* and can provide a *different* approach to teaching that may be helpful and rewarding *for certain kinds* of students—students who desire and/or need individual attention. Such a position is less dramatic than one that sees writing laboratories as different in kind, quality, and perhaps mission, but I think such a position is much more reasonable and politically tenable. In my case, I want to develop some sort of reciprocal relationship between my writing laboratory and the general composition program in my department. The worst thing I can do is to defend my writing laboratory in terms that smack of difference—terms which can be easily misinterpreted or denied by my colleagues in the regular composition program.

Another problem that easily leads to an "image" problem is a kind of fuzzy writing that often seems to be used to describe the work done in writing laboratories. Take the following passage from Lou Kelly's lead article in the first issue of *The Writing Center Journal*:

> What I'm learning from my students these days is reassuring. Though our pedagogy has not yet been perfected, the patient supportive work of a lot of caring teachers continues to make our Lab a place where people—students and teachers—can learn to think of writing, not as a drudging academic requirement, but a fulfilling dynamic process of sharing their experiences with others; where they see their own writing, not as a product to be criticized and graded, but as a means of exploring and understanding their perceptions of the world; where they can hear their writing as the voice of the unique human being each of them is and is becoming.[5]

What is a "drudging academic requirement"? I suspect it's any paper a student doesn't want to write or any paper Kelly doesn't want to read, although a "drudging academic requirement" could be *anything* academic since students normally write papers for school only when the paper is assigned as a requirement. In such an interpretation, the phrase

appears dangerously anti-intellectual at best and I am not sure my colleagues across the campus would appreciate it.

Further on in the passage, Kelly writes that students in her laboratory participate in "a fulfilling dynamic process of sharing their experiences with others"—and again I don't know what she means. I suspect she means that students read their papers to each other or to tutors, but I don't know why the process is necessarily "dynamic" or "fulfilling." Furthermore, I don't know if my goal in my writing laboratory is to have students "share their experiences" with me. I want them to write clearly and to demonstrate a command of their subject matter, but I don't necessarily want them to "share" everything they write. All good writing may not, in fact, be meant to be "shared" and all good writing may not be about one's "experiences"—a way of talking about writing that shifts almost everything into the affective domain and into personal narrative.

Finally, Kelly describes her laboratory as one in which students "can hear their writing as the voice of the unique human being each of them is and is becoming." Although I have no problem agreeing that students are unique, I have difficulty understanding what it means to "hear" writing as a "voice" of a becoming human being. I don't know what such language means and I am quite sure that my dean, a reasonably competent empiricist, might consider the language a bit remote from his concerns with academic literacy, hardly persuasive, and certainly not the kind of justification he wants for maintaining my laboratory's funding.

Those who write about writing laboratories also appear to be obsessed by a fuzzy notion of "process." The term appears in Kelly's quotation above and it appears throughout the literature on writing laboratories. In one of two recent books devoted entirely to writing laboratory operations and procedures, Joyce Steward and Mary Croft suggest that "labs can emphasize the writing process as classrooms, no matter how organized, seldom can."[6] Elsewhere, they write that "the lab movement has gone hand in hand with the emphasis upon teaching writing as process and with a growing recognition that the writing process differs for different individuals"[7] and that writing laboratories diminish "grading in favor of learning, product in favor of process."[8] They conclude their book by saying:

> We have learned, and continue to learn, that the best a lab can do is what the best teacher always does—treat the student and the process honestly, humanely, appropriately, and knowledgeably.[9]

The other recent book on writing laboratories is also replete with references to "process." Rudolph Almasy writes, "The writing lab promotes the student's acquisition of writing skills by directing energy and effort to activities which teach the student that writing is a process that must be entered into in a lively and deliberate manner."[10] Stephen North writes:

> I simply want the juxtaposition of these two perspectives—the traditional and the modern, product and process—to underscore what *is* revolutionary in the writing-center pedagogy I propose: for the first time we are able to address our students' writing processes directly and systematically, to move from informing students about writing to meddling with how they write.[11]

And Thom Hawkins defends the work of tutors in writing laboratories:

> A tutor...uses informal, congenial dialogue to guide students through the writing process...The nature of a classroom teacher's job is generally such that he can only examine and judge the *product* of a student's work, not the *process* the student uses to achieve that product.[12]

So what is this "process" that we treat "honestly, humanely, appropriately and knowledgeably" (Steward and Croft), "in a lively and deliberate manner" (Almasy), and that we address "directly and systematically" (North)? On one hand, "process" is a somewhat commonplace notion that almost *all* writing teachers use to describe what they teach their students. Sometimes this notion of "process" is broken down in steps—"Pre-writing," "Writing," and "Re-writing" or "prevision," "vision," and "revision."[13] Aviva Freedman adopts another series of steps: "starting point," "exploration," "incubation", "illumination," "composing", "reformulation," and "editing."[14] Stated in such elementary stages, it is unclear to me why teachers in writing laboratories necessarily address the "process" any better than those in regular classrooms. Indeed, I don't know any teacher in the regular composition program at the school where I teach who doesn't believe in this kind of "process" where "process" means helping students to get ideas (pre-write, invent), helping them write (compose), and helping them re-write (re-visualize, edit). There is, of course, the fact that some of these teachers may conceive of the "process" naively and *linearly*,[15] but even if they don't—even if we don't—there is no simple way to talk about the "steps" in any process without appearing to someone to be advocating a somewhat linear progression through time. And if I say to the "profession at large" that my

laboratory addresses this "process" better than they do—less linearly—they are apt not to understand what I am talking about.

On the other hand, if we adopt a more complex description of "process," it is possible that neither classroom teachers nor writing laboratory teachers can claim to address "process" "honestly, humanely, appropriately, and knowledgeably." In one of these more complex descriptions of "process," for instance, Charles Cooper and Lee Odell write:

> Composing involves exploring and mulling over a subject; planning the particular piece (with or without notes or outline); getting started; making discoveries about feelings, values, or ideas, even while in the process of writing a draft; making continuous decisions about diction, syntax, and rhetoric in relation to the intended meaning and to the meaning taking shape; reviewing what has accumulated, and anticipating and rehearsing what has accumulated, and anticipating and rehearsing what comes next; tinkering and reformulating; stopping; contemplating the finished piece and perhaps, finally, revising. This complex, unpredictable, demanding activity is what we call the *writing process.*[16]

How do teachers teach students or help students to "make discoveries...even while in the process of writing a draft"? How do they monitor or address "directly and systematically" a student's "continuous decisions about diction, syntax, and rhetoric in relation to the intended meaning and to the meaning taking shape"? How do they intervene in "a lively and deliberate manner" in a student's process of "reviewing what has accumulated, and anticipating and rehearsing what comes next"? These are especially difficult problems when, as Cooper and Odell suggest, "process" is "unpredictable" and as people who work in writing laboratories know, often students come in only once or twice on any given assignment. At best, teachers or tutors ask students questions, answer their questions, and possibly suggest methods and materials to help students to change strategies, find answers, and adopt reasonable solutions or options. But there is no clear way that any writing teacher—in a laboratory or in a classroom—can claim with any kind of certainty that he or she helps students to come to grips with the writing "process" itself where such a "process" is individual, unpredictable, and mostly invisible—and where most of the "process" is carried on at times and in places far removed from the classroom or laboratory.

With such pedagogical confusion associated with the idea of "process," it is no wonder that even way back in 1978, Nancy Sommers could write:

> ...I suspect that the word *process* exists in such a terminological thicket
> and has become so much jargon, so maligned and misunderstood, that
> the more the term is used, the less we seem to understand what is meant
> by the idea that composing is a process.[17]

And because even in 1982 writers are still defending writing laboratories
in terms of some vague notion of "process," it might be reasonable to
suggest that those who do not work in writing laboratories—the
"profession at large"—might view such talk of "process" as either
naive, lazy, or simply mystical.

As I read the literature on tutoring and peer tutoring, I am struck by
other notions that I think contribute to a kind of fuzzy writing that
doesn't do writing laboratories any good. Marvin Garrett suggests that
peer tutors "become sensitive to the choices and the possibilities for
growth and change within the tutoring and writing processes."[18]
Steward and Croft suggest that philosophically the writing laboratory
teacher is committed to "allowing the writer to grow."[19] But what does
it mean to "grow"? Obviously "growth" doesn't mean size (although a
couple of my tutees have gained a bit of weight on dorm food this year.)
But does "growth" mean to develop cognitive skills? Does it mean to
learn how to socialize? Can it be seen? Measured? Or is it, as I suspect,
a rather loose term used to refer to whatever writing teachers consider
"good" behavior? Elsewhere, John Roderick suggests:

> It is the tutor's responsibility to help the student discover that, indeed,
> everything needed to complete the essay is inside of [the student writer].[20]

Roderick points out that "with research oriented assignments, the ap-
proach is naturally varied slightly"—a statement he neither elaborates
on nor explains. Because he does not clarify what "research" in-
volves—what, in fact, the knowledge and intellectual experience in
other disciplines can contribute to student knowledge—and because he
insists on concentrating on the knowledge students already possess, an
outsider could conclude that writing laboratories are most useful when
students don't have anything to learn from other disciplines. Certainly
my colleagues in other departments would find such an oversimplifica-
tion of the academic experience to be self-serving and impractical.

Describing peer tutoring and "audience," Thom Hawkins writes:

> Conversing with a peer tutor is, for many students, their only chance to
> thoroughly know the academic audience by talking at length to that au-
> dience in the language of that audience.[21]

I might first ask whether a peer tutor can be described as an "academic
audience"—especially a peer tutor who may know nothing about the

student writer's academic subject matter, who may, in fact, know nothing about the *teacher* the student is writing for. More importantly, I doubt that *any* student gets to "thoroughly know" an academic audience—even a peer tutor—without living with that audience or peer tutor. Even then, I wouldn't take bets.

And describing tutoring and friendship, Muriel Harris writes:

> 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.[22]

I myself wouldn't want to attempt to improve the image of my writing laboratory by describing its operation as "inefficient." But I also have doubts about the notion of "friendship." There are times when I want and need to tell a student he is not a friend but a student—when I don't want to be his friend but an advisor who, on the strength of what I know, can recommend particular goals and priorities in instruction, can clarify muddles, and can help solve problems with or without friendship.

Finally, I would isolate a particularly weak kind of writing that pervades the literature on writing laboratories, a kind of writing that echoes the easy social sentimentality of the sixties. Tutors and tutees become a part of a "community of writers"[23] or a "real intellectual community"[24] where "community" appears to be some sort of mind spa where people "respond" to each other and carry on a "genuine dialogue"[25] full of "mutual respect and trust,"[26] "genuine understanding,"[27] and "mutual effort"[28] in an "open communicative atmosphere"[29] with an emphasis on "freedom,"[30] being "human,"[31] being "intensely personal,"[32] and dealing with the "real questions" and "real concerns."[33] I don't, of course, have anything against such a "community." The pastor at the church I used to attend talked about "community" a lot, also. And I am not saying that all writers use such language or use a lot of such language. I am, however, suggesting that such language calls attention to itself because it is too easy, too predictable. It also can be habit-forming at a time when we as well as our administrators and colleagues must expect more than the rewarmed language of social sentiment.

As I write this essay, the governor of my state has just announced that because of poor state budget estimates, our university administration will have to cut 1.2 million dollars in the next two months. The president of my university has said that cuts in staffing will come from support services. Because of the same budget cuts, the president of another university in our state system has recently announced that he

will cut all remedial services this year. As my program comes under scrutiny, I do not intend to talk to my dean about "process" or "community" or student "growth." I plan to keep my distance from such terms and allusions to writers of such terms because when the decisions are made about my credibility and the credibility of my program, such language and such a point of view will be of no help to me. Instead, what I intend to do and what others who must also worry about funding and credibility or "image" might want to do is to 1) begin cultivating a direct, accurate, no-nonsense style of writing and speaking appropriate for addressing the concerns of a writing laboratory and the concerns of others "out there"—both in the general composition program and the university community; and 2) begin developing a perspective on writing laboratory instruction that emphasizes cooperation and supplementation rather than separation and self-congratulation.

NOTES

[1]Muriel Harris, "Growing Pains," *The Writing Center Journal*, 1 (Fall/Winter 1982), 5.

[2]Harris, p. 5.

[3]Harris, p. 6.

[4]Research in cognitive style, particularly field dependence/independence might support such a view of student differences. See for instance H.A. Witkin, et al., "Field-Dependent and Field Independent Cognitive Styles and their Educational Implications," *Review of Educational Research*, 47 (Winter 1977), 1–64.

[5]Lou Kelly, "One on One, Iowa City Style: Fifty Years of Individualized Instruction in Writing," *The Writing Center Journal*, 1 (Fall/Winter 1980), 19.

[6]Joyce S. Steward and Mary K. Croft, *The Writing Laboratory: Organization, Management, and Methods* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1982), p. 5.

[7]Steward and Croft, p. 3.

[8]Steward and Croft, p. 5.

[9]Steward and Croft, p. 102.

[10]Rudolph Almasy, "The Nature of Writing-Laboratory Instruction," in *Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for WritingLabs*, ed. Muriel Harris (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1982), p. 19.

[11]Stephen North, "Writing Center Diagnosis: The Composing Profile," in *Tutoring Writing*, p. 42.

[12]Thom Hawkins, "Intimacy and Audience: The Relationship Between Revision and the Social Dimension of Peer Tutoring," in *Tutoring Writing*, p. 30.

[13]See for instance Donald M. Murray, "Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery," in *Research on Composition: Points of Departure*, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1978), p. 86.

[14]Aviva Freedman, "A Theoretic Context for the Writing Lab," in *Tutoring Writing*, p. 3. See also Janet Emig, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Grade Students* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1971).

[15]Freedman, p. 5.

10   *The Writing Center Journal*

[14]Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell, eds., *Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging* (Glenview, Ill.: NCTE, 1977), p. xi.

[17]Nancy Sommers, "Response to Sharon Crowley," *College Composition and Communication*, 29 (1978), 209.

[18]Marvin Garrett, "Toward a Delicate Balance: The Importance of Role Playing and Peer Criticism in Peer-Tutor Training," in *Tutoring Writing*, p. 98.

[19]Steward and Croft, p. 6.

[20]John Roderick, "Problems in Tutoring," in *Tutoring Writing*, p. 36.

[21]Hawkins, p. 31.

[22]Harris, "Growing Pains," p. 6.

[23]Judith Fishman, "On Tutors, the Writing Lab, and Writing," in *Tutoring Writing*, pp. 87, 93.

[24]Hawkins, p. 30.

[25]Garrett, p. 95.

[26]Anita Brostoff, "The Writing Conference: Foundations," in *Tutoring Writing*, p. 21.

[27]Roderick, p. 32.

[28]Hawkins, p. 29.

[29]Hawkins, p. 30.

[30]Steward and Croft, p. 5.

[31]Kelly, p. 16.

[32]Hawkins, p. 27.

[33]Harris, p. 6.