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Hilary Taylor Holbrook

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Issues in the Writing Lab: An ERIC/RCS Report

Hilary Taylor Holbrook

The needs of a changing college student population have generated an increasing number of writing centers or labs, where students can get help with their writing. Writing center clients range from those who need simple feedback on a content area assignment to those who need intensive tutoring because they lack the writing skills needed to do college level work. In addition to changes in student population, new developments in pedagogy and technology have raised issues that writing labs must address in fulfilling their mission. Using ERIC and other sources, this article will explore three of the more pressing issues confronting writing labs and centers—staff training, technology, and outreach.

Training Writing Center Tutors

Because budgets and the increasing number of students using writing labs (writing labs and writing centers will be used interchangeably here) usually prohibit staffing solely with composition faculty, many labs use student tutors, usually undergraduates (peer tutors) and graduate student teaching assistants. While peer tutors are likely to possess better than average writing skills, their skills may not be sufficient for helping many writing center clients, or for the one-on-one conference approach most successful for these students [Fishman, ED 210 699]. Tutor training then becomes a major issue.

New tutors come to their early tutoring sessions on the lookout for errors, and, according to Harris [ED 281 218], “to talk at students.” Beginning tutors have a tendency to “be an English teacher” in the sense of

one who imparts “correct” information. Harris suggests that training focus on showing tutors how tutorial instruction differs from instruction in the English classroom.

A different perception of peer tutors is that of “sympathetic listener” [Garrett, ED 210 699]. Such a tutor is often the product of a training program that minimizes syntax and organization, “out of fear that peer tutors will adopt the stance of the mini-teacher.” Thus these tutors often provide psychological and emotional support before addressing specific writing problems.

Both extremes in tutor attitude, observes Garrett, “undermine the genuine dialogue that is at the heart of peer tutoring.” He advises that peer tutors learn to be balanced—i.e., both direct and responsive—qualities that can be taught using role playing followed by peer criticism activities.

Brannon [ED 210 699] believes that tutors need to understand that three approaches—directive, sociable, and balanced—can be used, depending on the situation, the student’s needs, and the student’s motives for seeking assistance. While the balanced approach integrates most effective communication qualities, the sociable approach is equally valid for competent writers who lack self-confidence, and the directive approach is useful primarily for mature writers working under time constraints who need feedback on errors they may have overlooked. The ability to choose the appropriate approach, Brannon notes, comes through practice and awareness.

Computer Assisted Instruction

A second issue writing center administrators must address is the partnership of technology and composition. Although the microcomputer will not necessarily improve the writing of more competent writers [Hawisher, ED 268 546], computers can enhance the revision skills of students most likely to seek help in a writing center [Kurth, ED 277 049; McAllister and Louth, ED 281 232]. By facilitating revision, computers can indirectly teach students better writing techniques and can also assist in direct instruction. Word processing systems can also lessen some of the tedium of revision.

Establishing and maintaining a word processing system in a writing center can be overwhelming to an administrator already besieged by staffing and budget concerns. At the very least, a director must be able to demonstrate the basics of the system to other lab personnel, to coordinate scheduling and procedures with other faculty members, and to supervise or coordinate instructional and maintenance personnel. Schwartz [EJ 349 061] lists several things an administrator can do to make the task of implementing a system easier:

1. find out what others in the field are doing;
2. get technical help from someone who does *not* sell equipment or software;
3. establish minimum and maximum needs and get estimates about price and availability;
4. discuss the plan with administrators, funding agencies, and others who will be using the lab;
5. include security for equipment in the planning and in the budget;
6. prepare support materials and set policies for computer use.

In addition, lab directors must choose software that is both affordable and appropriate to the goals and pedagogy of the lab. Sunstein [ED 282 206] provides criteria for choosing appropriate computer software for writing centers and recommends some current software. Categories of software include record keeping/databases, drill and practice/computer assisted instruction, complete writing packages, prewriting tools, writing tools/word processors, revision aids, spellers, and publishing packages. Herrmann and Herrmann [ED 276 055] explore the technology of computer networks, which enable students sitting at one microcomputer to interact with peers or an instructor at another work station by means of computer message systems. Thus, students can effectively carry out many aspects of the writing process while on-line, from researching data to collaborating with teacher and peers.

It follows that lab directors will be responsible for seeing that tutors are sufficiently trained on the computer system to help clients use the system. Marshall suggests concentrating on training adjunct faculty or staff, or any small group that, collectively, will cover all the hours the lab will be open. They can subsequently train those with whom they work. He also recommends developing word processing exercises for tutors, requiring those who cannot successfully complete the exercises to attend practice sessions at least two hours per week. The center can also pay a computer-wise tutor to work with less experienced tutors. Rather than a last resort, this option should be considered during the planning stage so the cost can be figured into overall expenses.

Outreach: Beyond the English Department

Because students have difficulty with writing assignments in various content courses, the work of writing centers must reach beyond the English department. Writing center outreach programs can take a campus-wide or a community-wide character.

A relatively inexpensive public relations campaign—advertisements in campus media, brochures distributed through campus mail, libraries and bookstores, and a beginning of the semester lecture circuit—will bring the writing center's services to the attention of students and faculty. Hayhoe [ED 210 699] suggests a series of term-paper workshops in conjunction with writing center staff, librarians and content area faculty as a way to reach faculty and students outside the English department. Sessions on grammar and other mechanical aspects of writing, stages of the composing process, or types of writing (e.g., essay exams, letters of application) may also be popular workshop topics. Offering individualized instruction for all the students in a particular course has also been a successful outreach approach.

Deming and Valeri-Gold [ED 275 001] assert that writing centers should expand beyond their colleges and into the community. Offering after-school writing workshops for elementary and high school students or collaborating with high schools developing their own writing centers [Brinkley, ED 281 226; Sorensen, ED 210 699] can help students prepare for the writing demands of college or the job market.

On-site workshops also are beneficial for local business employees. One such program was offered by the writing center at the University of Texas at San Antonio. In a series of meetings, writing center staff worked with employees of the Texas Department of Human Resources on such topics as effective letter writing, medical terminology, and simple English as an alternative to bureaucratic jargon. Community outreach programs engender a sense of cooperation that helps demystify the university and the process of writing in the eyes of community members.

Solvable Problems

Writing centers cannot take the place of quality instruction in the classroom. But if they are adequately funded, well-administered, and effectively used, they can provide a non-threatening environment, a process-oriented approach to writing instruction, an opportunity for building self-confidence, and a chance for students to explore their writing abilities freed from the constraints of pencil and paper. The issues that writing center administrators must grapple with in order to provide these benefits to student writers may be unwieldy, but the literature suggests that the problems are not insoluble.

More information on the operation of writing labs can be found in the ERIC database using the descriptors WRITING LABORATORIES and HIGHER EDUCATION.

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