

15 Equipment for the Writing Lab/Center

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To paraphrase the old saying about education, all you really need in order to have a writing lab is a teacher on one end of a log and a student on the other. However, it helps if you have a few materials, some equipment, and more than one teacher. What we have in our lab at Hazelwood West High School goes far beyond basic necessities. I can't emphasize too much, however, that it is not necessary to have any special equipment or resources to get started. If you can get released time for a teacher to work with students individually, seize the opportunity and don't worry about what you don't have. Once you get started, you can always try to add staff, order supplies, buy equipment, or improve your facilities. If you wait to start until your school district is willing to give you everything, you may never have a writing lab.

Once a teacher has been given released time, the next step is to find a suitable place for the lab. Depending on whether you are to work primarily through the English department, as we are, or whether you are to serve all departments equally, you will want to choose a place that is accessible and visible to the clientele. The first two years that we had a lab, it was separated from the English department by a long hall. We felt that the distance prevented teachers from sending as many students to the lab as they might otherwise have done. Last year we moved into a new facility in a corner of our library, across the hall from the English classrooms. Students and teachers both seem more aware of our presence and use the lab more often.

No equipment is necessary for starting, but a computer or two can be very helpful since word processing can be a great motivator for writing. We started with one Apple IIe, a dual disk drive, and an Epson printer. Both the lab staff and the students learned to use the equipment during the first year. The second year we had six computers,

two of which had dual disk drives, four Epson printers, and an NEC Spinwriter (letter-quality) printer. By the time we moved in the fall of 1985, we had ten Apple IIe's and seven printers. At the present time, we have twenty-four stationary computers (all Apple IIe's) and eleven printers (the same Spinwriter, some Epson MXs, some Epson LXs, and one Epson FX). We also have a computer, disk drive, and monitor on a portable cart to be used with a large-screen monitor on another cart. These units can be checked out by teachers for use in classroom instruction. Fifteen of our computers have 128K, and I would advise anyone purchasing computers now to be sure that their computers have at least that same capability. However, we are not having any problems with our original 64K machines.

If you have computers, buying software is the next step. You need to choose wisely because there is so much available now and much of the software will not be very helpful. We no longer buy usage, punctuation, or grammar programs because the few we have do not get used. We use the Apple Writer II word-processing program and find it very easy for high school students to learn, and yet powerful enough to perform many of the sophisticated functions they may need for their papers (such as using superscripting and subscripting in research papers).

However, since computer use has grown so rapidly in the past few years, we have had some problems. Apple has changed its DOS (disk operating system) from 3.3 to 2.0 (ProDos). Our programs are 3.3, which Apple does not produce any more, so we cannot replace them. To buy additional disks for our new computers, we have to buy the ProDos version of Apple Writer. ProDos does not work exactly the same way as Dos, and it is more complicated for students to use. Not that the students can't learn to do it—but most of them already know the 3.3 version. This is an example of the unforeseen kinds of problems you can run into when you deal with a developing technology. We continue to use the 3.3 disks, but we know, that when those disks wear out, we will have to retrain our students.

Other software that you will find useful includes a spelling checker (we use Sensible Speller by the Sensible Software Company) and a graphics program (we have Print Shop). In addition to these, we also have Newsroom, and Apple Works, and PFS File, Sort, and Report for record keeping. The first two are used by journalism and modern media classes and by some teachers. Students who know those programs already come in occasionally to use them.

Accessories that you will need for your computers include a supply of disks and boxes to store them in. You will also need paper for your

printers. Letter-quality printers should be loaded with heavier paper than that which is used for dot-matrix printers. Tables for the computer components are another essential. A separate table for each computer unit (comprising keyboard and CPU, disk drive, monitor, and printer) is desirable. But we have two units on some tables. Tables with wheels are especially helpful because you can move the units around to gain access to wall plugs. Multiple electrical strips are very convenient, although you can get along without them if you have an electrical wall strip or many, many wall receptacles. We use one multiple strip of six outlets for each unit.

Because we do not have one printer for each computer, we have printer interface boxes to which two or more computers can be plugged in. The box enables us to switch on the printer from either computer. These boxes are available to serve two, three, four, and perhaps more computers. We assign one printer to every two computers to ensure that we have time to get all students' work printed within the class hour.

I've written many words about computers, here, because they are an integral part of our writing lab. But I want to state once more that they are not a requirement for a tutoring lab. In fact, because we have so many computers, we have to try very hard to keep from becoming a computer lab instead of a writing lab. We feel it is crucial to maintain our identity as a tutoring center because our students need more help with writing than they do with computers.

With that thought in mind, let me tell you what other equipment we have that can be useful, with or without computers. The main piece of equipment is an electric typewriter. We still find uses for it, in spite of all the computers we have available. You'll also want plenty of bulletin board space for displaying student writing and announcements about writing contests. A teacher's desk, some tables and chairs for students, and bookcases, a storage cabinet, and a file cabinet will all be useful. However, you could get by with a table and several chairs for the teacher and students to use together.

In our writing lab we have gathered two kinds of materials. We have one bookcase full of textbooks used in our composition courses, literature books used in our literature courses, dictionaries, thesauruses, style books, pamphlets on special writing problems, and file folders of suggestions for taking essay tests, writing resumes, and getting started on a paper. In our other bookcase, we keep materials that can be used by English teachers or any other interested teachers. These materials include approximately seventy-five books on teaching writing as well as collections of periodicals that relate to writing, for which the lab has subscriptions. Every month we receive a class set (thirty

copies) of *Writing* and one copy each of the *English Journal*, the *Quarterly* of the National Writing Project and Center for the Study of Writing, *Computers, Reading, and Language Arts*, and *The Computing Teacher*. These materials are available for teachers to check out.

Because our school board and administration have been so generous in buying equipment and supplies for us, we have what we consider a rather luxurious lab. But all of the staff members feel, I believe, that we were performing a much-needed service even in our first year, when we didn't have much more than the log sitters. The most important ingredient is the teacher with the desire to help students learn to communicate their ideas clearly in writing. If your school will pay for that teacher, you can open for business.