



# WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

---

---

Vol. VI, No. 4 (December, 1981)

---

---

'Tis the season to make resolutions for next year, and high on many of our lists is the determination to offer students more and better help with spelling. To assist us there are three articles in this issue of the newsletter which focus on spelling help...and among other articles and announcements, some sane advice from Susan Glassman on how to handle those incessant interruptions in our teaching.

Please keep sending your articles, suggestions, reviews, announcements, and \$5 donations (in checks made payable to Purdue University or to me) to:



Muriel Harris, editor  
WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER  
Dept. of English  
Purdue University  
West Lafayette, Ind. 47907

\*\*HAPPY HOLIDAYS TO US ALL\*\*

---

## THE TEACHING OF SPELLING: A SUCCESS STORY

Directing the Educational Opportunity Center at Dixie College for the last two and one half years has been, without doubt, the most vigorous activity of my professional life. When I think back to the years preceding my moving from the composition classroom to this vital three-ring circus where I direct support services for every discipline on campus plus teach two levels of basic composition, all levels of reading, and all levels of spelling, I wonder why I allowed the switch. But I have no regrets; at least, now I don't. Two years back, however, I was having all kinds of them. Not about the support services. Not about the composition classes. Not even about the reading classes although they still do cause many problems because of the wide range of abilities and skill represented in

in a class labeled simply "Reading Improvement." The class, the one credit "To Be Arranged" offering, which kept me awake nights was Spelling Improvement 146. Not that I did not try to make it a worth while course. Not that my students did not try to learn to spell better. We analyzed spelling problems individually and categorized them, we relearned rules, we did exercises of every kind and shape. But at the end of the ten week quarter, almost everyone was spelling on about the same level as he/she had been at the beginning even though each could recite rules and knew the words he/she worked on specifically.

But no more. Now I run an easily manageable class with enrollment growing every quarter. It is a class where all learn a new technique for spelling better without lessons and rules and with carry-over to words not studied.

The secret behind this fantastic learning is a filmstrip entitled Spelling Techniques: Tactile Kinesthetic Method, produced by Tutortapes, P.O. Box 256, Groveland, CA 95321. (In October of 1979, this program cost a mere \$45.)

The technique works like this. From his/her own writing, each student and I chose 50 words which should be learned as soon as possible, usually words such as "because," "coming," "sophomore," and "receive" ("big" words, which can also be mastered easily by this approach, are sometimes included if the student so desires.) We then divide these lists into groups of five; each group becomes a week's assignment. On Tuesday, slips for the current five are made with each word written in magic marker as large as possible in cursive writing on a two by eight-inch piece of paper. Every day for six days, students work on their slips, one word at a time. First, they trace a word on its

slip at least three times with the forefinger, while resting the whole arm on the desk or table top. As the tracings are done, the students say the words aloud, trying to synchronize the saying with the tracings. Under no circumstance are they to spell by letters--only by the saying aloud of each syllable as they trace or later write. Second, they remove the slip and "write" the particular word each is working on at least three times on desks or table tops again using the forefinger/arm approach and exaggerating the size of the letters. Then, if they feel they have "programmed" the correct spelling into their muscles and minds, they write with pens and paper. If there is any doubt at any time as to the accuracy of the spellings, they are supposed to go back to the first step and begin again.

After a week's work on the lists, the students take their own personalized tests over their words for that week. And after studying the next group of words, they are tested on both sets and so on up until the final tests, which consist of all fifty words for each student.

The spelling tests are as different from the traditional spell-twenty-words-a-week test as the approach is from the way spelling is taught on the elementary and secondary levels in that they consist of complete sentences and, whenever possible, of connected discourse. The examiner reads as fast as each student can write. There is to be no hesitation over the spelling words (students do misspell other words, but these are simply added to a list of words to be mastered after the ten week period or substituted for other words in the original list if the student wishes to substitute), and 90 percent of the time, even when the lists grow to 50 words, students achieve 100% accuracy.

The theory behind this approach is that most good writers spell automatically; very few spell by letter very often, and when they do, the **hesitations** that result constitute a disruption in their writing processes. The intent of those who use the tactile kinesthetic method, similar to the intent of those who use "sand spelling" and other therapeutic procedures, is that students should try to "program" words into their automatic spelling systems.

And it works. In three quarters of using this approach with about 75 students, only a

very few have failed to learn their words, always because they have failed to complete the ten week course. Even better, all who do finish report that they are able to spell other words, words that have not been studied. Much speculation could be advanced on the reasons for this success, but in this day of increasing problems in meeting the needs of underprepared students, I simply will remain forever grateful to Tutortapes for coming up with a spelling technique that really works with adult and remedial students.



Janice Kleen  
Dixie College




---

### SPELLING INVENTORIES

The tutor file with its convenient log is an ideal place for a student's spelling inventory. In the classroom, I have often tried to put into practice Irmscher's common sense that poor spellers have patterns of difficulties--rarely ever more than seven. My occasional success with students (a young man discovered that he dropped one of doubled consonants: totaly, posess, and beautifuly and I learned of my own consistent misspelling of double c words) was overshadowed by the enormous bookkeeping problems.

Difficulties with spelling inventories in the classroom have always been those of records and number. Students forget to record the errors from an essay (it's the old behaviorist's who-wants-to-keep-track-of-his/her-failures-anyway syndrome), lose their inventories, or the teacher cannot get to all the students during the term.

Writing Center procedures invariably include a log--a perfect media for spelling inventory--and a tutor--the "spelling" analyst. As a tutor in our Center, I recorded the following twenty-three words from a tutee's papers: (1/29/81) ansewer, expermented, restlessly, spead, boered, (2/5/81) awear, suppose (2/10/81) effected, perfum, himselfe, dieing, (2/19/81) monester, quickley, no, use, deseigner, tipical, and (2/26/81) tipical, suppose, then, applience, awear, and toled.

All but six of the student's misspellings had to do with dropping, transposing, or substituting vowels. The six others were either homonyms (then/than, effect/affect, and know/no) dropped d's (suppose/supposed

and use/used) or colloquial English (himsel<sup>v</sup>/himself).

Having the log contain the spelling inventory made it easy for us to remember to record errors and to watch for patterns. We soon saw that the letter e caused the most difficulties. The student recognized that he often added it between consonants and between consonants and vowels: ansewer, restlessely, boered, monester, quickley, deseigner, and toled.

Just recognizing this one pattern has helped the student reduce his errors by fifty percent. He has been excited and is already energetically attacking the e = a and the e transposed with a problems (spead/speed, aware/aware, and appliance/appliance). The student asked me at the close of our last session why no one had ever noticed his misspelling patterns before. That's the type question we all hate to be asked, but maybe if we use the tutoring log and keep on-going tallies on our students' misspelling, we will be called on to answer it less often.



Chopeta C. Lyons  
Greater Hartford Community College

#### A TUTOR TUTORS SPELLING

When Julie Along was confronted with a student who came for help with spelling, she could have panicked. Instead, she took the time to analyze "Wendy Wheaton's" problem, discover a recurring difficulty with syllabication, and do some research on rules for syllabication. When she'd exhausted her familiar resources (e.g., the Practical English Handbook and whatever else came to hand from the shelves in the writing room), she came to me and I was able to give her a book devoted to punctuation, capitalization, and spelling, a book that spelled out, as it were, steps for learning syllabication. And finally Julie gave "Wendy" some general rules of thumb, such as keeping a dictionary handy. In the process Julie recorded her activity in her journal, excerpts of which are given below. (The journal entries are supposed to be freewriting; her reluctance to use a dictionary here is not typical of her approach to more formal writing.)

I show Julie's entries to beginning tutors, as a model for working with a student with a

particular problem. (The entries are part of our tutoring handbook, c. 1980, which I'd be happy to share with anyone willing to send \$2.00.) Julie starts out acknowledging her nervousness, with which beginning tutors certainly empathize. She also gives herself the leisure to analyze "Wendy's" problem, to read through "Wendy's" papers. She does this by giving "Wendy" something to do, a diagnostic test in spelling--instead of glancing through the papers as "Wendy" looks on and exerts covert pressure for a quick response. Then Julie shows her willingness to refer to other resources--that is, her willingness to acknowledge that she doesn't know all the answers off the top of her head. She also takes the time, between sessions, to research "Wendy's" problem--many tutors would probably have settled for regular spelling quizzes, supplemented perhaps with drills on all available spelling rules, without concentrating on the rules that particularly trouble "Wendy." One might not entirely agree with all of Julie's advice: is it always a good idea to stop and check spellings on a first draft? If one has trouble getting words down on the page, mightn't the frequent stopping cause even more self-censoring, even more difficulty getting something down? But Julie honestly shares what she thinks is the best practice. And her entire approach proves to be quite successful.

Thus I offer Julie's description of her sessions to you, in hopes that you too will be able to share your tutors' strategies, which I can then steal for Julie and other tutors at Wheaton.

\*\*\*

Hooray! Frabjous day! I finally got a tutee! And of course she doesn't want help with something easy like organization, or something I'd be really good at. No, she wants help with spelling. Spelling is my absolutely, positively worst thing to help in because I know absolutely none of the rules--zippo, zilch. I just spell by intuition. So it's very good therapy for me--painful--but good therapy. "Wendy Wheaton" came to me in the dorm and said her professor had recommended that she see a tutor. "Wendy" showed me the papers she had written, and I gave her the dittoed spelling test while I read through her

papers for the words she misspelled most often. She seemed to be having problems with double consonants in words like "accommodate." (I probably just spelled it wrong--however, I'm too lazy to get up and check my dictionary). Anyway, then I corrected her test and we both dragged out our magical bibles--the Practical English Handbook. I read through the chapter on spelling and went over some basic rules with "Wendy." I picked out some words from the lists there and gave her another quick test....

Later I found that the spelling problem "Wendy" had is called syllabication. When she came to see me a second time, I had compiled another test of words from that grammatical wonder (the handbook) plus some from her papers. We went over rules in the book again--things like soft and hard s's, splitting up words into syllables, and looking for prefixes, suffixes and roots. At this point I felt a little useless and stupid for **two reasons**: 1) all I was doing was reading and rereading, and 2) the more you read words that involve syllabication--the harder it is to concentrate and spell them right yourself. (Sort of looking at the same word for so long that eventually it makes no sense.) It was during this session that I decided to go to a "higher authority" for help, guidance, etc. This is how I ended up with a type of do-it-yourself spelling book that had a whole chapter on syllabication with steps on how to learn the words misspelled most often (was that grammatically correct?!?). So I planned on having "Wendy" learn these steps and try to memorize the whole list because I figured the only way to learn these words was to see them repeatedly...

After "Wendy" and I decided on a third meeting, I picked out some typical words from the spelling book....I went back and checked out her most common errors and compiled a final spelling test, and I also rewrote the five steps. When "Wendy" came in for her third meeting, the first thing we did was go over the grammar book to clarify a rule that had been misunderstood. Then I gave her the new test and we spent the rest of the half hour going over the five rules and talking about spending time on words, so that they become more familiar. I told

her I thought that writing a paper with a dictionary right there could help as well as stopping and thinking about the word or looking it up when she was writing. I think that familiarity is only going to be developed by looking at these words, whether it's through reading them in the dictionary or the spelling book. I don't know if further tutoring would help because I think most of the progress has to come from her. Perhaps seeing me occasionally to give "progress checks," so to speak, would be helpful.

Julie Along and Beverly Lyon Clark  
Wheaton College  
Norton, Massachusetts



The Writing Instructor is a journal designed to meet the needs of writing/composition instructors and tutors in secondary and higher education. The Editorial Board solicits material of the following nature:

- articles of 8-10 double-spaced pages which blend theory and pedagogy to the practical ends of classroom experience
- successful classroom techniques or plans
- notes on resources
- announcements

Subscription to the quarterly publication is \$8.00 annually for individuals and \$12.00 annually for institutions (includes microfiche). Please send material and subscription requests to: The Writing Instructor  
c/o Freshman Writing Program  
University of Southern California  
Los Angeles, CA 90007

---

## CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENT

The Writing Center Association will hold its fourth annual conference at Ohio Dominican College, Columbus, Ohio, on May 1, 1982. The theme of this year's conference is: The Future of Writing Centers: Programs and Resources.

According to the verbal exchange at the open forum of last year's meeting and the evaluation forms completed by conference participants, the greatest and first area of concern among us is the writing center's instruction of ESL students.

Other suggested topics of interest include:

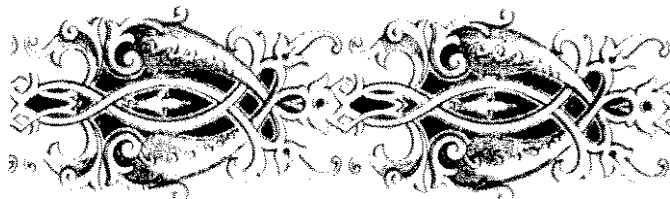
- . sources of revenue and proposal writing
- . the function of reading instruction in the writing center
- . expectations and interactions with the English Department and other disciplines
- . use and effectiveness of CAI and/or other pre-packaged instruction materials
- . staff training

We are now inviting proposals on these topics which would either fit into a one-hour workshop format or a twenty-minute individual presentation followed by a five-minute question and answer period. Again, according to comments from last year's participants, a practical how-to approach would be appreciated and a simple reading from papers is heartily discouraged.

We look forward to an informative and meaningful conference!

Please complete the proposal form at the bottom of this page and return it no later than January 15, 1982.

Joanne Petrick  
Ohio Dominican College



## THE WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

If you wish to submit a proposal, complete this form and mail to:

Joanne Petrick  
English Department  
Ohio Dominican College  
1216 Sundry Road  
Columbus, Ohio 43219

1. Topic:

2. Materials and Equipment Needed:

3. Audience:

4. Description and Purpose (one or two paragraphs):

If you wish to attend but do not wish to make a presentation, mail this form to Joanne Petrick.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

## THE WRITING CENTER IN AN IDENTITY CRISIS

An individual caught in an identity crisis must confront the question, "Who am I?" The inability to answer this question is usually the result of philosophical uncertainty and a confusion as to one's roots and values. Similarly, the College Writing Center whose activities in the past decade have been described ad infinitum at national and local conferences and in numerous professional publications, has skirted definition, and as a result, a specific identity. This is due ostensibly to the belief that the center has already been defined by indirection, a belief that by describing what is done in the center, de facto, describes what it is. A CCCC report, The Learning Skills Center confirms this and defines a center very generally as a place "where students can come, or be sent, for special instruction not usually included in 'regular' college classes."<sup>1</sup> And for the most part these centers boast of practicing "individualized instruction" and using "programmed materials," terms used frequently and obtusely in the jargon of our profession. However, these "places" in tandem with reading laboratories are helping under-prepared college students improve their use of standard American English, another phrase that cannot be precisely delineated.

Some of the centers, including our own at Northampton County Area Community College, offer a plethora of instructional modes to meet a variety of student needs and levels, diagnostic and formative assessments, autotutorial materials, and professional tutoring. Most have as their primary objective the improvement of basic language skills, although neither the pedagogue nor the linguist has agreed conclusively on what is "basic" in language instruction, and even greater disagreement occurs when they try to determine what is basic for whom--the adult beginner, the second language student, the second dialect student, or the learning disabled student. All of these kinds of students can be found on any given day or evening in our "typical" lab at NCACC. So, what is a writing center?

Difficulty in defining exactly what a writing center is lies in the difficulty

in defining the specialized instruction that takes place there. Addressing this problem, Mina Shaughnessy, the late director of the Instructional Resource Center at City College, CUNY, suggested a guide for basic language instructors in her milestone study, Errors and Expectations. After close readings and intricate interpretations of 4000 student compositions, she identified categories of common syntactic, grammatical, and mechanical errors, thus providing us with a core of competencies, and a description of basic writing students as novices who "write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes."<sup>2</sup> As a caveat to all teachers of basic composition, in particular to those who favor prescribing competencies before thorough diagnostic analyses, Shaughnessy asserts that the term "basic writer" is a specious abstraction. Not all students make the same errors, nor do they make the same errors for the same reasons; that is, "there are styles to being wrong."<sup>3</sup> Yet even Shaughnessy has had her detractors. Her conclusions have been questioned primarily because her interpretations of what beginning writers were trying to say, in other words, unscrambling their idiosyncratic syntax, was admittedly subjective, and it was from these interpretations that her nucleus of "basic errors" was drawn.<sup>4</sup> The argument as to the substance of the instruction in a writing center continues, but it is an essential continuum for the probe into the nature of the center itself.

In addition to the theoretical question about what constitutes basic language instruction is the administrative dilemma concerning the center's jurisdictional identity. Should the center be managed by the Director of Developmental Studies (if one exists), or a member of the Humanities faculty? There is some historical and philosophical precedence for the latter. The original writing workshops or laboratories provided ancillary instruction for students enrolled in English classes, and were supposedly dedicated not only to the development of English proficiency, but also to the development of the total human being--the aegis of the Humanities. Still others will argue strongly that the experts in cognitive styles, namely members of the Education Department could more effectively manage a writing center. Unfortunately,

where to place the center, and how to manage it will fall victim to administrative whims and internal politicking unless well-informed, unbiased faculty and concerned administrators together establish specific philosophical and instructional objectives.

The jurisdictional problem is only one facet of the administration of a writing center. Once the location has been established within the curricular structure of the institution, a second problem is how to make it "cost effective." Obviously a quality program is expensive. Individualized instruction (whatever it is), the latest in auto-tutorial technology, including computer-assisted instruction and management, testing materials, consultation fees, and on-going research are all costly and strain the budgets of most colleges. As a consequence, many supervisors or coordinators find their time monopolized by writing and administering grants, and juggling grant guidelines and budgets. Most of them would prefer spending time designing viable programs, and perhaps even engaging in research. But the most dangerous consequence of the relative and periodic availability of "soft" money for developmental programs in general, and writing centers in particular, is the fear that the center is dispensable. Nothing can be more harmful to an academic program than a budget that may be sufficient one year, lean another and obliterated the next. Although grant awards are usually "seed" money for inaugural projects or innovative research, administrators have become addicted to outside funding sources, so much so that many college budgets could not operate without them. Consequently, personnel are convinced that if ever federal or state wells run dry, their programs and positions may be abandoned. This not only creates insecurity among the staff, the majority of whom are hired under grants, and whose temporary positions are always in jeopardy, but also debilitates the quality of the instruction the staff has the potential of achieving. Moreover, it makes continuity of instructional services impossible. What other academic program must tolerate such circumstances?

Assuming the funding problem was solved, and the center achieved a sense of purpose because of a strong administrative commitment, its internal management is still another issue, one which has its roots in the center's jurisdictional identity. The

assignment of the leadership of the center must be more than an administrative exigency. Since the "director" will give the center its "direction" and emphasis, he or she will be primarily responsible for its emerging identity within the academic community. In addition to managerial talent, this individual must have an appreciation of the diversity of learning modes, a practical grasp of testing materials and techniques, but most importantly, a thorough knowledge of developmental language instruction: a comprehensive leadership for a service that goes beyond teaching students how to write acceptable academic English.

There are numerous other problems involved in managing a center. One of the immediate problems a supervisor faces is staffing and scheduling. Too many centers are staffed by part-time temporary instructors, full-time faculty on released time schedules, or inexperienced graduate students. This is corroborated by the OCCC report referred to earlier, and by an unpublished survey conducted by Reginald Touchton in 1977.<sup>5</sup> Several of the centers rely on "drop in" instructors, i.e., full-time faculty who are assigned laboratory duty in place of a regular composition class regardless of their attitude toward developmental instruction. Such random staffing and scheduling is not in the best interest of the students who must develop a sense of security there. It also points to the more serious problem of administrative and faculty indifference to developmental endeavors. Related to the scheduling dilemma is the question of awarding academic credit for laboratory learning. The same reports indicate numerous accommodations including awarding non-transferable credit (in two year colleges), deferred credit for completed competencies, and contract credits (a specified number of hours of instruction for a proportional credit award.) Some colleges offer non-credit laboratory instruction to support a compensatory basic writing class with in-house credit. Such is our present modus operandi at NCACC.

At this point, I believe it is obvious to most that the term "writing center" is a parochialism and a misnomer. Comprehensive basic writing instruction does not burgeon in vacuo. It grows within the whole complex of the human communicative experience of listening, of understanding, of remembering, of thinking, of speaking,

and finally of reading and writing. A more accurate name might be selected from any of the following; Communication Skills Center, Learning Center, Language Skills Center, Basic Skills Laboratory, or Developmental Skills Center, and so on.

Our profession is particularly susceptible to the use of imprecise terminology, and I have also been somewhat guilty of imprecision by using the terms "basic" and "developmental" synonymously for the purpose of presenting my views. There is a significant difference. The term "basic" we inherited from the practitioners of "error analysis," and in particular, the devotees of the work of Shaughnessy who have assiduously studied and discovered primal difficulties of language acquisition in the growth toward acceptable academic discourse. On the other hand, the term "developmental" I have sometimes misused to avoid writing "remedial" which seemed to me outdated and certainly pejorative until I read a clarification of these terms by Darrel A. Clowes in the Journal of Developmental and Remedial Education. Clowes places these terms in their social and historical context. "Remedial education," he writes, "denotes the activities correcting specific deficiencies in skill areas, improving student's writing and mathematical skills, and addressing the general area of study skills." It has a "curative" and "palliative" connotation.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, "developmental education" is less static and is viewed as evolving from "a long series of developments within the student personnel movement culminating in an attempt to merge activities of academic and student affairs personnel to support student learning."<sup>7</sup> As such, these "growth-oriented" programs are in direct contrast to both compensatory and remedial projects whose collective goals are to raise the performance levels of underprepared students to arbitrary competencies. Developmental, therefore, is the more comprehensive epithet and includes the stages students go through on their way to both personal and academic maturation. Whether the writing center becomes incorporated into a Basic Skills Center or a Developmental Skills Center is probably immaterial as long as the historical values of both concepts motivate the instruction that takes place there. I proffer my own definitions to clarify the dichotomy further: "Developmental" describes the uniqueness of an individual's cognitive style in the

process of growth; "basic" describes the uniqueness of an individual's language style in the process of growth. If this appears to be splitting hairs, then so be it, for the identity of a center will not evolve unless the words of our trade are accurately ascribed--words that form the basis of the structure from which the design emerges.

As a consequence of all of this, the writing center can no longer be limited to a "place" where underachievers may be taught to write better by using programmed materials with the help of tutors. The center must be defined as an integral part of the total college curriculum for students with special learning and language styles. It must be guided by spirited directors and staffed by competent specialists. Its identity will be clarified only after faculty and administrators clarify their own values as educators.

Angela Scanzello  
Northampton County Area C.C.

- <sup>1</sup>Learning Skills Center: CCCC Report (Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English, 1976), 1.
- <sup>2</sup>Mina Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 5.
- <sup>3</sup>Ibid., 40.
- <sup>4</sup>David Bartholomae, "The Study of Error," CCC, 31 (October, 1980), 264, 265.
- <sup>5</sup>Reginald F. Touchton, A Study of Developmental Education Programs of Community/Junior Colleges and Technical Colleges (unpublished, 1977), 7. This survey was conducted primarily among southern colleges.
- <sup>6</sup>Darrel A. Clowes, "More Than a Definitional Problem," Journal of Developmental and Remedial Education, 4 (Fall, 1980), 8.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid., 9.

---

INTERRUPTIONS ARE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR TUTORING

In a past issue of the WRITING LAB NEWS-LETTER, Muriel Harris raised several pertinent questions that center around the role of the writing lab director. Her specific inquiry concerned the constant interruptions with which a writing lab director has to contend as he or she is tutoring and how they affect the student who is being tutored. Since this is a common problem among writing



lab directors, one that has certainly plagued and frustrated me, I would like to comment on and suggest how to alleviate this situation.

The problem occurs because our roles are neither clearly defined nor understood. Professor Harris alluded to this issue when she stated that no one would think of interrupting a classroom teacher with a phone call, a salesperson's request for time, or a student's need to reschedule an appointment. No matter how innovative a teacher's style is, **the classroom has** acquired an aura of inviolability about it, which people have been conditioned to respect. Furthermore, a teacher's day has been divided into the formal teaching of the classroom and the teaching-related activities of the office.

The confusion concerning the role of the writing lab director has developed because of our efforts to **dispell** some of the traditional notions concerning learning. One of the primary functions of the writing lab is to **create** an informal atmosphere for learning, one that is student centered rather than teacher centered, a place where people can drop in for help and **information** in casual surroundings that have replaced the formalities of the classroom. However, as we make ourselves accessible to students with writing problems, we also become available to those who need us for other reasons.

Limited funding and the way in which most labs begin are additional causes of the frequent interruptions during tutoring with which writing lab directors must contend. Because writing labs are in their incipient stages and often a low financial priority, many begin small, usually with little or no staff beyond the director. Initially, the director does most of the work, both the tutoring and the administrative tasks. When there are few students and not many administrative chores, this arrangement is an efficient way to run a lab. But once the demand for services increases, and the director tutors a larger number of students, recruits staff, schedules many appointments, and answers an almost constantly ringing telephone, the administrative and teaching duties of the director begin to interfere with each other.

Related to the small budgets with which most of us work is the problem of the

space allocated to writing labs. From colleagues, I gather that by and large writing labs have a problem acquiring adequate facilities. Most of us consider ourselves fortunate if we are assigned any space at all, often in an undesirable location and too small for the needs of the lab. Since office space for writing lab directors seems to be the exception rather than the rule, we transact all our writing lab activities and business in the lab itself. Unlike classroom teachers, we cannot divide our work into classroom teaching and office duties. As we always appear handy to answer questions, whether they be important or trivial, it is difficult for people to separate our teaching/tutoring from our administrative chores.

However, although unnecessary interruptions are annoying, that, of course, is not the major issue. If we are indeed student centered, we have to think of how the students with whom we are working fare while we are being disturbed. Many of our tutees use writing labs because they have difficulty following and understanding what is going on in the classroom, and they need the personal contact that writing lab staff provide. For a student to work with a person who is interrupted several times during a session certainly diminishes the positive effects of tutoring. Some students have enough problems concentrating on the task at hand without contending with outside distractions. Furthermore, one of the most important aspects of tutoring is the personal relationship that develops between tutor and tutee. Students come to a writing lab because they feel that some one cares, thinks they are valuable, and listens to them. If the tutor then is interrupted by trivia, the importance of the tutee is diminished, for he or she appears less worthwhile than the phone call that is answered or the salesperson that appears. When I have been interrupted while trying to help students, they have often said to me, "If you don't have the time, it's all right--I'll figure it out by myself," and I always feel that they are testing me to see if I'm committed to working with them. Students who take the time to get help in the lab are entitled to be tutored by someone who can really listen to them and concentrate on the job.

As with most problems that seem indigenous to writing labs, this one has no simple solution, but I can make two suggestions

that will at least alleviate some of the frustra-<sup>10</sup>tions. First, writing lab directors must realize that we can't do everything all the time. When a writing lab begins with a few students, even though we do most of the tutoring, in addition to the administrative, secretarial, and housekeeping duties, the demand on our time is usually heavy but not detrimental to our students. However, as the numbers of students increase, we spend more time tutoring and also more time running the lab. We have to admit that we can't do both effectively, and that as our labs grow, our roles must change. A director of a lab serving many students cannot afford the luxury of much tutoring. As the lab expands, he or she must let others do most of the tutoring and pay more attention to the day-to-day concerns that make the lab function.

My second suggestion concerns the problem of interruptions during whatever remaining hours we do tutor. The best solution, of course, is to get a competent secretary or receptionist who can handle much of the management of the lab, screen out nonessential phone messages and visitors, and forestall other kinds of interruptions. However, since most of us cannot afford such a staff position, it is essential that we train tutors or any other staff that we have, whether professional or student, to do the same. They can take messages, resched-

ule appointments, and let people know when we will be available. When I do tutor, I leave one of the student workers in charge with explicit instructions that I do not wish to be interrupted except for emergencies from my family. (During all my years at the university, I have never received a business phone call that couldn't wait another half-hour.) At first, attempts to get my attention away from my students persisted, but I refused to answer the phone or to speak to those who asked to see me. After a while, people began to understand that during this time I was available only to the students whom I was tutoring, and now these interruptions have virtually stopped.

As with other problems found in writing labs, this one is easier to describe than to correct. But I have learned that in a writing lab it is the little things that we do that eventually make a difference. By refusing to be disturbed for an administrative question, we can improve the quality of help we give to at least one tutee, and even though there are no simple solutions to the dilemmas that confront us, we are successful if we have had an effect on the lives of one of our students.

Susan Glaseman  
Writing/Reading Center Director  
Southeastern Mass. University

---

WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER  
Muriel Harris, editor  
Dept. of English  
Purdue University  
West Lafayette, Ind. 47907



 SEASON'S GREETINGS 