WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

In the next few months several writing lab conferences will bring some of us together to exchange ideas and shop talk. Those who would like to write reports or "impressions" of these conferences are hereby invited to send your articles to the newsletter. This may help those whose budgets and heavy schedules do not permit conference-going to share in what was said. And keep sending your announcements, reviews, queries, articles, names of new members, and $5 yearly donations (in checks made payable to Purdue University but sent to me) to:

Muriel Harris, editor
WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER
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TEACHER AND COMPUTER JOINING FORCES IN A WRITING LAB

At Miami-Dade Community College, a computer-based instructional management system called RSVP (Response System with Variable Prescriptions)* has been incorporated in a writing lab (as well as a variety of other lab and classroom settings) to individualized students' learning. The RSVP applications, developed by campus faculty members in conjunction with the staff of Miami-Dade's District Division of Computer-Based Instructional Development and Research, exemplify the system's capacity to encourage systematic planning and evaluation of instructional approaches and to manage with prescriptive feedback the learning of a heterogeneous group of students.

"RSVP Lesson Selection" enables the staff of the Developmental Studies Writing Lab (North Campus) to make individualized study/exercise assignments (from a pool of over 400) according to each student's reading level and language attribute (native speaker or English as a Second Language learner). After diagnosing a set of writing samples and filling in an optical scanning form for each student to indicate which skills need to be worked on and at what level, the staff members receive from RSVP a list of possible assignments for every student.

It is interesting to note that the process of developing the RSVP component proved to be as beneficial as the staff has found the program itself. First the Lab's writing objectives had to be re-examined as they were being structured into a machine-readable format. Then each Lab material had to be evaluated according to the objectives it would cover and the students it would suit in terms of reading level and other characteristics. This process naturally enhanced professional communication among Lab staff members. Furthermore, the program has systematized the materials in the Lab and provided feedback on the use of the objectives and on the areas needing the support of more materials. Finally, while they are being trained, new Lab personnel can rely on the computer's memory to generate appropriate assignments.

Also available to faculty members on all of Miami-Dade's four campuses is an instructional feedback program in writing. This RSVP program simply requires students to write regularly and teachers to make a twofold decision about each paper: one to place the paper at the appropriate level (a decision based on the skill areas included at each level and the readability estimates of the feedback), and the other to analyze the specific problem(s) warranting feedback to the student at that level. The program

allows faculty members to select--from a bank of over 180 instructional messages written at 4 reading levels--feedback concerning the mechanics and organization of a written assignment; the program is independent of specific course content, textbooks, and class setting. The following grid for one level illustrates the basic structure:

LEVEL A GRID

Once the selections are made for a student, RSVP prints the feedback in an individualized letter that generally runs from two to four pages.

At the end of a term, RSVP can provide descriptive statistics on the number of messages (or prescriptions) given to students in the skill areas at each level of the writing program. It can also, in conjunction with other computer programs, shed some light on how users have implemented the system for particular groups of students whose attributes (such as native language, ethnicity, assessment scores, and the like) are stored in Miami-Dade's Student Master Records and are accessible to RSVP. One can ask, for instance: Do Spanish-speaking students receive different prescriptions than English-speaking students? Do those who score below the cut-off point on their basic skills assessment test in English receive different prescriptions than those who score at or above the cutoff? Do the findings differ from feedback level to feedback level?

In one examination, we found that the five most frequently chosen skill areas at each level of feedback were selected in the same order of priority for all students at that level, regardless of whether they were Spanish speakers, English speakers, above the English cut-off, or below it. These findings, of course, raise other questions: Are the students, indeed, all showing similar problems in their writing? To what extent does this trend reflect the perceptions of the faculty members about writing? Do the grids representing the available skill areas offer sufficient choices to allow for unique groups of prescriptions to be generated for different groups of writers? Is this kind of discrimination even necessary according to those who teach writing? Does this activity through RSVP match the perceptions faculty members have about what they are doing?

To date we have not answered all these questions, but they do show the capacity of RSVP to provide valuable statistical feedback that can inspire, challenge, and motivate those who use the system. As these questions are meant to suggest, what may begin with the computer extends well into the larger teaching/learning picture. As tools for course/program development, implementation, and evaluation, systems such as RSVP promote the benefits of careful planning and strategic monitoring that live on independently of the system that may have inspired them. Interestingly enough, any program developed for RSVP has the potential to be its own "editor," in the sense that its use during a term provides feedback for timely revisions at a later date. The director of the writing lab referred to earlier has aptly stated: "Perhaps the most surprising discovery for a staff that prides itself on individualization and human interaction in small group and one-to-one instructional settings is the way in which a computer system such as RSVP can enhance personalization in education rather than take it away."

Currently Miami-Dade is directing an exciting international project to produce a microcomputer system based on the same

principles of learning and instruction touched on in this article. Called CAMELOT, this individualized information system is interactive for the faculty to help them develop and implement their own computer-based applications in any discipline or setting. The writing feedback program just described will be made available as part of CAMELOT, which will be ready for distribution in June 1983. If you would like to receive more information about the work we are doing, please write to me at Miami-Dade Community College, 11011 SW 104 Street, Miami, Florida 33176

Lorne Kotler
Miami-Dade C. C.

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*The "response system" is comprised of data input based on a configuration of student attributes and performance, while the "variable prescriptions" are printed sets of feedback designed by the faculty to instruct or advise each student according to his or her unique combination of characteristics. In addition, the RSVP system maintains a cumulative record that enables its users to have frequency reports upon request. Because it is content- and context-free, RSVP can be programmed to cater to any mode of instruction, size of enrollment, level of education, or kind of time frame. Written in FORTRAN, with some Assembly routines, RSVP operates in the "batch" processing mode on an IBM 370/155 OS/MVT computer.

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RHETORIC REVIEW

Appearing in September and January, Rhetoric Review focuses on articles and essays aimed at balancing theory and praxis in the teaching of writing. Manuscripts are invited on theory, practice, and strategy of current movements in rhetoric. Send two copies of manuscripts (subscriptions are $5 annually) to Theresa Enos, Editor, Rhetoric Review, Department of English, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX 75275.

Kentucky Council of Teachers of English
Annual Conference

March 25-26, 1983

The Louisville Inn

Louisville, Kentucky

for more information: Gretchen Niva
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, KY. 42101

ROCKY MOUNTAIN WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATION
CONFERENCE

The Rocky Mountain Writing Center Association will hold its first conference on Friday, June 10, 1983, at Utah State University. Judith Fishman, Queens College, will be the featured luncheon speaker. We are inviting proposals for one-hour workshops or 20-minutes presentations. Possible topics include the following.

--computer-assisted instruction

--research in the writing center

--materials

--writing-across-the-curriculum

--outreach programs

--administration

--staffing

--tutor training

--writing centers in the public schools

There will also be a materials exchange in which writing centers will share promotional and instructional materials. One-page proposals or completed papers should be submitted no later than April 1, 1983. Please note in your proposal whether it will be a one-hour or 20-minute presentation. Send proposals and requests for more information to Joyce Kinkead, Department of English UMC 32, Utah State University, Logan, Utah 84322.

THE ADULT LEARNER IN THE WRITING CENTER: TEACHING TECHNIQUES

During the past eight years I have worked in three different schools that have writing and learning centers. I designed the writing center for one of those schools. I wish now to tell you about the practical things I learned and did during that period. I must first clarify, however, that I am going to describe a writing center that was designed specifically for a non-credit class. But I am sure that most, if not all, of the following suggestions would work in a credit program also.

The Developmental English class was a four-contact hour, non-credit class that met at night twice a week. The class was based on an open-entry, open-exit, self-paced format.

The classroom consisted of tables and comfortable chairs that were positioned in open and half-concealed positions around the room. One writing center even had a few upholstered chairs and a coffee table, a less institutional area where the student and instructor could adjourn for discussion. Book shelves held a large variety of workbooks, audio cassettes, and slide series (such as the Center for Humanities series). Video machines and tape recorders were housed in carrels along side wall. A rolladex was used to index the workbooks and handbooks according to the pertinent subject matter. If a student or instructor wanted information on subject verb agreement, for example, s/he would know exactly what page to turn to in the available books. The file cabinets housed individual student files plus a great deal of mini-course materials to which the students could help themselves. The mini-course sheets in the file cabinets had answer keys filed in front of them, and there were also answer keys within the workbooks. The answer keys saved time, gave the student instant feedback, and spared him/her embarrassment if s/he did poorly. Accordion folders containing other free materials were stapled on the bulletin board. (Wall-file pockets also work well and can be permanently mounted.) The folders contained examples of paragraphs and essays illustrating comparison and contrast, definition, argumentation, illustration, literary analysis etc. . . . It is also important to have more than just the basic and rudimentary kind of materials. For example, I had copies of Kennedy's Inaugural Address, and I frequently had students read it and underline examples of repetition, parallel structure, and figurative language. Such an item can be used for the marginal student as well as the more advanced student. Another such example would be Eugene A. McCarthy's short essay entitled "One Man's America." In it he alludes to the famous essay by Orwell on "Politics and the English Language;" he uses for illustrations the euphemistic, vague language that was used to describe the escalation of the Vietnam War. Another such example is Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The mere availability of such materials helps the students see the relevance and importance of their language and brings them its impact in other avenues of their life. Other more current examples would be Buchwald's column parodying the Pope's definition of the word "concupiscence" and Rayko's newspaper column debunking Phyllis Schafley's contention that nice ladies are not the recipients of sexual harassment.

A portable flip board or presentation easel containing sheets with explanatory materials about sentence structure, paragraphing, and essay writing was also part of the resources. In working individually with the students, I often found myself repeating or writing the same materials on the blackboard. The presentation easel allowed me to turn to the appropriate materials as I needed them, and if necessary, the student could go back to it to see the materials again.

There were also several visual reminders around the room, for instance, shorthand examples of sentence construction. Three ways to write and punctuate a compound sentence:

1) _____ ; _____

2) _____ , and _____

_____ , but _____

_____ , for _____

3) _____ ; conjunctive adverb, _____

Such visual reminders help plaster the concept in the student's mind.

There were also, of course, hardbound dictionaries, thesauri, the Wagnall's Book of Synonyms, The Elements of Style, etc. . . .

When students first came to class, I gave them a file folder and explained that it would be kept in the file to hold their materials and record their instructions, work and progress. The room was always open so a student could return anytime, take out his/her folder and continue working. I also asked the students to fill out an information sheet about themselves--the high school from which they graduated, their major, their reason for taking the class, their English background, and their perception of their writing abilities. Another sheet was also part of the file, and on that sheet would be recorded the student's test scores, program, assignments and dates, and recommendations. Such information proved invaluable when students moved on to other classes and instructors made inquiries or subsequent referrals.

In addition, students were asked to take a grammar test and to write an essay. The test covered only those aspects of grammar that relate most directly to composition--subject/verb agreement, clauses, types of sentences, punctuation. . . . The students marked their own tests and that worked out effectively. The procedure gave them immediate feedback, lessened the stress of being evaluated, and encouraged them to take an active part in planning their programs. After I evaluated the essay, the student and I discussed the test and essay and planned an appropriate program of study. I showed the students what kind of materials were available and let them choose whatever they preferred, an important factor for adults particularly. I must admit, however, that some were incapable of

choosing and wanted me to make all of the decisions. In those instances I readily made the decisions and tried always to choose materials in which the student was likely to succeed. I also asked them to sign a contract specifying the amount of work to be done and the time frame in which it was to be done.

In this kind of individualized program, the instructor is a resource person and one who instructs as needed. I used to go around to each student to ask how s/he was doing. If two or more students needed help with the same material, I worked with them as a group. Those who wanted help seized the opportunity. Those who didn't want help were left alone. For the most part the students were able to handle the grammar on their own. Composition was another matter.

Even though I never stressed a straight grammatical approach to composition, I found that many of the adults, especially those forty and older, wanted exactly that. Many asked me to diagram sentences on the blackboard, yet when I pressed those students to apply what they had learned by writing, some would balk. The application of the grammar was, of course, the real test and some were not willing to go that far. In a credit program, of course, they have no choice.

Once I was sure that the students understood and could recognize the different forms of paragraph development, I had them write four paragraphs--one of comparison and contrast, illustration, definition. . . . They were given a choice. They were also given models that they could imitate and those helped very much. After that I moved them into essay writing and showed them how the patterns of organization were the same and spent time on thesis statements, overall organization, and coherence. I frequently used the process essay as the first essay. The how-to-do-it essay and the how-it-is-done essay worked very well because they provided ample topics for the student (through jobs and hobbies) and almost always insured success.

I found that the non-traditional students often did better with informational subject matter rather than personal experience themes. They often bogged down in personal experience themes or sometimes were not able to make the transition needed when they entered other classes and had to write about

academic subjects.

What were the problems in this system? What worked? What didn't?

1. The entry/exit interviews are very important but very time consuming. I found myself listening to endless monologues about what "my former English teachers did or didn't make me do or what I didn't do that I should have done." I used to think that those monologues had a cathartic value for the student, but I no longer believe that. In addition, even for the most patient instructor, such dialogues can become debilitating.

2. Students like the hands-on approach. They like browsing through handbooks, readers, and research manuals. Seeing and using good hardback dictionaries, thesauri and other such aids sometimes convinces them that they should part with twelve dollars and buy one for their home use. They also like taking and making their own grammar and vocabulary tests.

3. Keeping files on the students was necessary and worth the effort. During the exit interviews, the student and I could look over accumulated work, and weakness. In such a way, the student can learn that writing is indeed a developmental process that does not end with that particular course.

4. A great deal of time can be spent in informal academic advising or personal, career counseling kinds of discussions. Consequently, the instructor must be knowledgeable enough to understand when and where to refer the student to specialized help.

5. In marking papers one must always remain objective and diplomatic. The witty, but caustic remark will usually be considered an affront.

6. Such classes always demand a very low student-teacher ratio. I would recommend a seasoned teacher assisted by two TA's or good tutors.

7. Non-traditional students in a non-credit class will often refuse to sign contracts.

8. In a non-credit course, enrollment can drop tremendously.

9. Non-traditional students are frequently too ambitious and will attempt more than they can reasonably handle.

10. Audio-tutorial and slide series materials must be reviewed carefully before they are purchased. Adults will consider some of them insulting. I have not found them to be tremendously popular. The English mini-course series with tapes and manuals is popular and so too is the Center of Humanities series on "The Research Paper Made Easy." It comes in three segments.

I am sure that all of the practical suggestions I have mentioned would work twice as effectively in a credit composition course for the most obvious reason--the students will receive tangible credit for their work; consequently, they are more likely to take advantage.

Rose Ann Kalister
Director, Academic
    Development Center
Ohio Dominican College

BOOK REVIEW

If you're looking for a book that will challenge your students, introduce two effective strategies for improving writing, help develop reading skills, require active participation, and make learning fun, I recommend William L. Stull's Combining and Creating: Sentence Combining and Generative Rhetoric (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983). Using the principles of sentence combining and Francis Christensen's generative rhetoric, the book teaches students how to write more effectively by developing fluency and the ability to write mature sentences.

Each chapter begins with material that explains and illustrates a sentence-combining technique, such as coordination, subordination, or modification. This is followed by short and long sentence combining exercises, as well as writing assignments

that use the material in the exercises as springboards. The short exercises include the basic two to seven sentence "Combinations"; "Creations" that require students to add to a given sentence in both signaled and unsignaled formats; and the demanding "Sentence Acrobatics," the "syntactic muscle-stretchers." The long exercises range from paragraph length assignments of about twenty sentences to essay length ones of about one hundred sentences.

What makes this book different from other sentence-combining texts is Professor Stull's introduction to generative rhetoric, his exercises based on the writings of professional authors, and the material that connects the writing and reading processes. Although the entire book is influenced by Christensen's generative rhetoric, Stull devotes one chapter to discussing addition, direction of movement, levels of structure, texture, cumulative sentences, and bound and free modifiers, which are some of the key ideas he derives from Christensen.

Most of the exercises in Combining and Creating come from pieces written by professional authors which Stull has "re-written" into a series of sentence kernels for students to recombine. Thus, students have the option of comparing their versions of the sentence combining with what the professional author has written, deciding how their writings differ from the original and which versions are the most effective.

Although the major focus of the book is to improve students' writing, it will also improve their reading skills. The introductory material in each chapter teaches students how to read professional writing closely. In addition, as students combine their sentences, they are confronted with making semantic and syntactic choices, teaching them how to analyze the meanings of sentences. Finally, by re-reading and comparing their sentences with those of other students, as well as with the professional models, students learn how syntactic choices produce different meanings and effects.

Even though Combining and Creating was intended primarily for the classroom and will certainly be effective there, it can also be a valuable writing lab resource, by helping students who are concerned with

improving style, have difficulty writing clear sentences, write mostly in simple sentences, write decent but dull papers, or need work in reading comprehension. Combining and Creating can also be used for tutor training, as it can introduce tutors to both sentence combining and generative rhetoric, making stylistic choices, and the writing-reading connection.

The best parts of the book, however, are the exercises derived from the writings of 237 authors. Combining sentences that come from Isaac Asimov or William Faulkner or Calvin Trillin's writings allows student writers to enter the company of published authors instead of relegating them to remedial and corrective tasks. It is fun for writers in training to compare their versions of a given piece with the original. They can see how their writing differs from that of Hemingway or Updike and whether they prefer their choices to those of the professionals. Once students get started in Combining and Creating there is much challenging material to keep them interested and to engage them in the writing process.

Susan Glassman
Writing/Reading Center
Southeastern
Massachusetts
University

TEACHING FOR COGNITIVE GROWTH

On November 5, 1982 the ninth annual Ohio Developmental Education Conference was held in Cincinnati, co-chaired by Phyllis Sherwood and Tanya Ludutsky of Raymond Walters College. The keynote speaker, Hal Herber, Professor of Education at Syracuse University, described the features of developmental instruction with great cogency, and I think writing lab staff members will find his ideas useful and supportive. His talk was entitled, "The Paradox of Theory and Practice in Developmental Education"; what follows is a somewhat inferential reconstruction from the notes I took during that address.

Views differ on what development means with regard to education. Some educators

see development as a natural course of growth, which can be assisted if appropriate steps are taken to mediate learning. But according to another view, students exhibit deficiencies compared to what their capacities "should be" for success in college. For those teachers who perceive the need to remedy deficiency rather than simply to support a student's natural course of development, burnout may result. For one thing, the student's deficiency may appear overwhelming; for another, the task of remediation may seem to require far more time and energy than the student can devote to it and still complete the semester's course work.

In reading, for example, some educators think that learning to read develops into reading to learn by a natural progress. The opposite of this assumption is that people can't read to learn because they can't read--so the student who is having trouble learning from his physics book is recycled through learning to read. This is an instance of the Principle of Specialization in Process: When you're holding a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Accordingly, people who specialize in reading teach phonics to the student confused by his physics text. The student, who is now studying phonics instead of physics, becomes frustrated, perhaps rebellious, and may burn out along with the teacher. Next, the reading teacher decides to assess the situation more thoroughly by giving entire classes pretests with informal reading inventories and applying readability formulas to texts.

Upon seeing the results, the physics teacher decides that the mismatch between difficulty of text and reading level of incoming students is intolerable; clearly, an easier text is called for, one that matches the students' demonstrated ability. Here the fallacy in this line of reasoning becomes most evident, for the books should be too difficult if students are to develop cognitively. How can their minds grow if they are deprived of opportunites to grapple with challenging texts?

Now Hal Herber's Principle of Specialization in Content comes into play. The Herber Principle states that ignorance increases with specificity, and it points up the real deficiency in the situation, which does not reside in the student. The student is already known not to be learned in the subject, else she/he wouldn't be taking the course. Deficiency does not reside in the text either, for the text necessarily consists of information unfamiliar to the learner.

What is deficient is a teaching method that wades right into detail, since to do so is to move onto the student's area of ignorance. Much more helpful is a conceptually based approach, which gives the learner a context into which to place the specific information the course presents and shows the learner how to move from one stage to the next: how to read to learn physics.

After this introduction, Professor Herber outlined the conceptual approach he had once used in teaching about the formation of the United Auto Workers. First, the class worked in small groups free associating on the word protest for 90 seconds. The group generating the most words or phrases associated with the concept read theirs aloud to be listed on the board, and other groups added to the list. Then the class compared and discussed them all. The same was done with the word winning. In this way a conceptual base common both to the students and the teacher was formed. Next a list of statements was shown to the students, who discussed whether workers protesting would agree with each of them:

You can't have what you don't work for.

Violence solves problems.

People have no right to protest.

Protests bring results.

Leaders do listen.

People have the right to live comfortably.

Only after this opportunity to express, examine, and compare their own ideas and those of their peers were the students asked to read a chapter on the formation of the United Auto Workers, which moved them into their area of ignorance. But by this time, they knew what they as individuals thought about the basic issues, and they were familiar with the ideas of the group,

including the teacher. The area of ignorance had been significantly reduced before the students were asked to embark upon the sea of specificity.

Such teaching incorporates the following features of developmental education:

1. It builds on students' strengths, feelings, interests, and ability to articulate. It shows them how to use what they know to help them learn more by engaging them in prequestioning strategies, by guiding their search for information and for relationships among pieces of information.

2. It focusses on ideas, substance as the subject of study--not skills. Developmental instruction recognizes that reading, reasoning, and writing are holistic processes, not fragmented into skills.

3. It uses group work to mediate learning, since where cognitive growth is the aim, collaboration is more effective than didactic teaching.

In conclusion, Professor Herber observed that teachers at all levels should use this nurturing style of instruction.

Mary King
The University of
Akron

CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

The MISSOURI ENGLISH BULLETIN is proud to announce that it will publish annually a journal edition, beginning in July 1983. In choosing a single theme for the focus of each journal edition, the editors hope to provide a notable collection of articles of interest to members of the profession.

The focus for the 1983 journal edition is "Revision." Articles dealing with this essential part of the writing process at all levels of instruction are solicited.

What practices have proven most effective for you in teaching revision?

How can teachers best motivate students to be interested in revision?

At what grade-level can students begin learning to revise?

What's involved in revision beyond correcting errors? How can students be taught to "re-see"? How do students become self-revising?

How important are peer response groups in the revision process?

How is revision related to other parts of the writing process?

Articles may range in length up to 2,500 words and should comply with NCTE guidelines on non-sexist language. Endnotes should follow the MLA Style Sheet, 2nd ed. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope.

The deadline for submission of manuscripts for the July 1983 issue is April 1, 1983.

manuscripts should be sent to:
Linda Wyman, Editor
MISSOURI ENGLISH BULLETIN
Lincoln University
Jefferson City, MO 65101