# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BASICS OF WRITING LABS

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In these times of constantly tightening school budgets, the first question any sane administrator will ask is: "Why have a writing lab?" It is a valid question and deserves a valid answer, one beyond the bandwagon response ("Everyone is starting one.") or the answer of the knee-jerk pessimist ("Lord knows we need something. Our kids are writing worse every year."). There are real answers to the question, answers which have to be firmly held beliefs. If not, then the effort in starting and maintaining a lab may not be worth it. The answers will be as varied as the labs created, but when searching for your own responses, you may want to consider the following ones.

1. To work with individual differences

Since language skills are not learned sequentially, every student will have different strengths and weaknesses in language arts. The teacher in the classroom can work with the majority of the problems that the majority of the students have, but ought the teacher spend class time on an area only a few students need to concentrate on? Obviously not, but where and how do students tend to their own individual needs, have their own questions answered, learn their own techniques for moving ahead in writing skills? The moment we recognize — or admit to — individual differences in students' writing competencies, we have answered the question of why a lab is needed. There has to be a place, a method, or a means to help each student move along in areas not covered in general class instruction. And

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this is as true for the more advanced student as for the remedial writer.

2. To offer personalized help

Because of the complexity of the composing process, we cannot really hope that a generalized discussion or a static, linear presentation in a text book is really going to do the job in teaching students how to write. At some point (some advocates of individualized learning would say at almost every point) in a student's progress through a paper, he or she needs personalized help, either in the form of feedback from a live reader or in the form of advice on how to proceed. The student may have read the textbook section on organizing, may even be able to repeat a couple of bits of advice on how to organize, but faced with a live piece of writing in front of him, the student cannot translate those generalities to the prose on the page. What needs to be done here, with this particular paragraph, with this particular sentence? Options need to be discussed, strategies suggested. In other instances, there is the often-observed phenomenon of the student who can repeat grammatical rules almost word-for-word from the text, yet who cannot apply them to specific cases. Again, there is a need for personalized instruction, and it is often the case that major breakthroughs in students' writing occur when they are finally able to apply what they have learned. This is frequently a lonely process, but a writing lab instructor sitting next to a student can often help the process proceed more smoothly and more quickly. Too often a student who expresses hostility toward writing is a student who was left on his own to solve his writing questions and problems.

3. To work at the composing end of writing

Groups can perhaps learn to sing together, maybe even learn a science lab skill together, but can they really write together? If not, then the classroom can be a place where writing is talked about and products are examined, but the composing process cannot be easily enacted in a group. Yet composition researchers are telling us how complex composing processes are and how dysfunctional inappropriate composing processes can be. If we realize the need to tend to teaching the process of writing, not just the evaluation of written products, then we need somewhere, somehow to teach processes, and this must be done one-on-one or in a

small group where processes can be demonstrated and tried out. A writing lab is an excellent and natural place for just such work, from sentence level composing to planning and perhaps even writing a whole paper. For example, revising — even at the sentence level — is a mysterious process for some writers, but not after a lab instructor and student have sat together for a few minutes working and re-working a sentence, trying versions aloud, recasting phrases, weighing options. Working at the composing end is a natural process in an elbow-to-elbow tutorial.

It is tempting to go on at great length as to why labs are valuable and necessary components of a writing program. Those who teach in labs know how effective they are and how rewarding they are, both for student and teacher. But once we make the commitment to tend to individual differences and acknowledge the need to teach at the composing end of writing, any further reasons for having a lab are merely minor flourishes on a well-wrought urn. The next question then, after the WHY is the WHAT. What shapes can a lab have? Fortunately, the answers vary in every case since every lab is different. Labs exist as separate facilities with a tutorial staff, and they exist as workshop areas in classrooms. Any place that permits some individualized instruction can be a form of a lab.

Whether the lab occupies a huge wing of a library and is equipped with elegant hardware, whether it is a cozy little closet off a classroom with one third-hand, slightly damaged tape recorder, or whether it is an unused corner of a classroom is of little consequence. On the other hand, a lab has to be an informal, light, airy, easy-going, slightly messy, noisy place, a room or an area which in no way resembles a classroom. It is, after all, a lab, a trying-out place where help is offered and questions answered, a personal place where encouragement is dispensed as freely as grammatical rules. It is a place where a student can openly groan over having to master all the intricacies of the comma and can indulge in a bit of gloating when he finally does.

As a lab grows and expands, the contents will change to fit the needs of the student population, but there are some basic considerations for what goes into a lab. Some instructional matter to assist tutors ought to be developed and be ready at hand. This may be home-made handouts or published materials — whatever fits the lab's needs and/or bud-

get. If possible, there ought to be some recognition of different learning modes. Tape cassettes for audio instruction, slide projectors or videotapes for visual presentations — whatever is appropriate and available. Students learn in different ways, and a lab ought to recognize that fact by having a wide variety of instructional settings available: tutors, texts, tapes, and anything else that a creative director can think of.

The list of questions that can be asked in any introduction to writing labs will most probably proceed from WHY to WHAT to HOW. Having touched briefly on WHY and WHAT, I will be as brief with the last question, HOW. At the end of this essay is a short bibliography of further readings which despite the hundreds of pages included in those books, journal, and newsletter, just barely covers some of the real nuts and bolts of how to start, structure, run, and expand a lab. What they treat in depth is mainly a two-step process. First, before a lab can be started, the needs of the student and teacher population have to be assessed. What really is needed, what kinds of skills are the students being taught, and what skills are not taught but ought to be? What do the teachers really want, and will they support a lab by referring their students to it? A lab cannot be started and given a shape that does not conform to the writing program in which it resides. Instead, it must take its color, like a chameleon, from its surroundings. It will have its own integrity, but it cannot be an independent entity unto itself. A writing lab is a service facility, both to students and to teachers.

Because a lab is an integral part of a writing program, the second step in the process is to remain flexible, to change to suit the changing needs of the writing program, and to grow in ways that serve the writing program. Remaining flexible and remaining open to growth and change is so important to the success of any lab that over the doorway every lab ought to engrave the warning, "We shall not ossify." Growth and expansion is so normal in writing labs that few labs are not in the middle of growing pains at any given time. Word spreads, and teachers in other disciplines whose students must write will begin to investigate how their students can use the lab. Students who have other writing projects will drift in asking if they can get some help too. Lab instructors, sensing the need, will begin to realize the widespread value of their workshops and review sessions, and they will begin to realize the wealth of writing tasks at the

school that they can help with. Growth, as I said, is natural in writing labs. It's as natural as the success of labs, both for the student using the lab and for the teacher privileged to teach in one.

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