

1979

WRITING LAB REPORT

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SUMMARY

In the Spring, 1979 semester the English Department's Writing Lab continued to offer students individualized supplementary instruction designed to help them improve their writing skills. A total of 1336 students were helped in tutorial appointments, on an immediate drop-in basis, in mini-courses, in classrooms visited by the lab's Traveling Teacher service, and through the use of self-instruction materials available in the lab. In addition, the lab's Resource File of instructional materials and its library of books and journals on the teaching of writing were read by the composition staff, its lending library of grammar handbooks was used by students, its audio-visual programs were borrowed for use in composition classrooms, and its facilities and materials were made available to faculty members at other universities where writing labs are being planned.

Questionnaires aimed at evaluating the progress made by students who attended the lab were sent to the students and to their composition instructors. The responses to these questionnaires indicated that the tutorial instruction being offered by the lab increased the writing competence, grades, motivation, and self-confidence of the students who attended the lab.

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A. WRITING LAB INSTRUCTION AND SERVICES

In the Spring, 1979 semester the English Department's Writing Lab continued to serve as a supplement to the department's composition program, as a tutorial center for other students in the university by offering individualized instruction in basic writing skills, and as a resource facility for the composition staff. Using the instructional approaches, materials, and record-keeping system described in the "Writing Lab Report-January, 1976," the lab staff continued to provide personalized instruction needed by students to improve their writing competence. Specifically, the lab's work for the spring semester included the following:

1. Publicity. In its continuing effort to remind students and instructors of the lab's facilities, the lab director sent full-page informative handouts to all students enrolled in composition courses; sent out an explanatory pamphlet, Using the Writing Lab, to all new instructors of composition; visited classes when invited to answer questions about the lab's services; and gave short tours of the lab's facilities to other classes when such requests were made. In addition, articles and reminders appeared in Purdue's Exponent and in Purdue Reports.

2. Instruction in Writing Skills. In an effort to provide various types of instruction to fit different needs, the lab offered help in the following forms:

- a. Regularly scheduled tutorial instruction.

Students who need individualized instruction in basic writing skills attended regularly scheduled appointments with a lab instructor. This offered the instructor and the student the opportunity to establish a comfortable working relationship and to proceed more slowly when extensive remediation was needed. Lab instructors working with students on a regular or long-term basis were also able to follow the

students' progress in their classroom writing and to discuss the students' improvement with their composition instructors. During the spring semester there was a sharp increase in the number of students working in the lab on a long-term tutorial basis. As a result, fewer students than in the previous semester received tutorial instruction; however, more extensive instruction was provided this semester, particularly for foreign students, a group whose use of the lab continues to increase each semester.

b. Drop-in help.

Because the lab instructors also want to provide help for students who are not able to make regular appointments, have a quick question, need hand-outs from the lab's files, or want a little extra help, the staff scheduled one-fifth of their regular hours as drop-in time. During these hours a lab instructor was available to answer questions, help a student with some pre-writing discussion for a paper, discuss organizational structures for papers in progress, help students learn to proofread their themes, etc. Of the 214 students who came in without regularly scheduled appointments, many expressed their appreciation for not having to wait several weeks to have their questions answered. Others requested more hours of drop-in service each day because of the immediate help this provides. Drop-in hours were also used extensively by other undergraduates engaged in writing projects such as reports or term papers for other courses throughout the university, letters of application for professional schools or scholarships, thesis proposals, etc.

When asked to evaluate the usefulness of the drop-in system, 80% of the composition instructors who responded indicated that it was of great help to their students, and the remaining 20% reported that it

was of some help.

c. Mini-courses and the Traveling Teacher Program.

As in previous semesters, the Writing Lab again held mini-courses intended as small group instruction or review of the subject. Because of the past success of these mini-courses, the program was extended this semester to include a total of twenty-two different mini-courses offered to 331 students in thirty-four separate sessions. When asked to evaluate these mini-courses, 80% of those composition instructors who responded reported that they were of great help, and the remaining 20% indicated that the courses were of some help.

Recognizing the need to serve other groups of students to whom the lab could also offer assistance, the lab again offered a mini-course designed to help students review for the grammar section of the Law School Aptitude Test (LSAT) and another mini-course designed to offer assistance with writing letters of application, a session which is particularly useful in the spring when students are seeking summer jobs or permanent employment. Because the results of a lab survey of faculty members in other departments and schools in the University indicated that a mini-course on writing effective essay exams would benefit other groups of students not presently being served by the lab, a mini-course on this topic is being developed for the fall semester.

In addition, the lab continued a new program begun last semester in which lab instructors offered to teach their mini-courses in composition classrooms as "traveling teachers." This program, in which a total of twenty-five class hours of instruction were offered to 444 students was particularly appreciated by new teachers who were thus able to observe teaching techniques of more experienced instructors

and by other instructors who found the change of pace provided by a visiting teacher to be a valuable addition to their instruction. In their evaluations of the Traveling Teacher program, all the instructors who responded agreed that the materials were useful, that the lab instructors presented new ways of teaching the subject matter, and that the sessions helped their students.

d. Self-instruction materials.

The Writing Lab's extensive set of tape and booklet self-instruction modules on spelling, grammar, rhetoric, and vocabulary were again heavily used this semester. In addition to students who used these modules to supplement their lab work, an additional 155 students came in for 290 hours of independent study as part of course work assigned by their instructors. In the fall, when the lab will have six additional study carrels and tape recorders, purchased through funds granted by the Dean's Office, many more students will be able to take advantage of the lab's collection of self-instruction materials.

Of the students who responded to evaluation questionnaires on the use of self-instruction, 87% stated that they liked using these self-study materials, with the most often cited reasons being that they preferred to work at their own pace, were able to repeat difficult material, and enjoyed learning independently. Foreign students particularly appreciated the availability of such materials for extensive study.

3. Resource Center

a. Resource File for the composition staff and students.

The Writing Lab's Resource File of materials on the teaching of composition continued to be used during the spring semester. In-

structors came in frequently to dip into files of theme assignments, browse through folders of sample graded papers, read articles on composition, make copies of the lab's instructional materials, and borrow both books on the practice, theory, and pedagogy of composition instruction and also recent issues of the major college composition journals to which the lab subscribes. When asked to evaluate the Resource File, 92% of those composition instructors who responded reported that it was of great help, while the remaining 8% reported that it was of some help. A major improvement in the use of the Resource File this semester was the reorganization of the check-out system and shelf arrangement, a joint project undertaken by the receptionist and the Assistant to the Director. In addition, they have prepared a bibliography of the books and journals in this collection which will be distributed to the composition staff in the fall.

Another resource, initiated last semester, is an accompanying bookcase filled with publishers' samples of grammar handbooks, rhetorics, workbooks, and readers. These books are available as a lending library for students who wish to supplement their reading in their assigned textbooks or who find their textbooks inadequate. This lending service has proved to be a popular one for students in composition courses, for graduate students in need of books to help review for the English Proficiency Exam, and also for other students at various levels of proficiency who want handbooks to study on their own.

b. Resource for other institutions.

As a result both of published articles describing the Writing Lab Newsletter, which is edited by the lab's director and mailed to over 500 labs and learning centers across the country, the Writing

Lab continues to serve as a clearinghouse for information on labs. In addition, all specific phone and letter requests for information describing Purdue's Writing Lab have been answered with copies of the lab's instructional materials, record keeping forms, descriptive booklets and semester reports; and on-site visitors, both faculty members planning new labs and graduate students researching labs for doctoral dissertations, have been given tours of the lab's facilities.

4. Future Growth

With the addition of a greatly needed full-time receptionist, more space in which to work, and more instructors for next fall to serve an increased number of business writing students and also engineering students enrolled in English 003, the lab will be able to improve and expand its services. For next year, new mini-courses are being developed, closer coordination with various aspects of the composition program is being developed, and more materials for the business writing students are being written.

B. STATISTICAL SUMMARY OF THE USE OF THE LAB

The following tables describe the student population using the lab during the Spring, 1979 semester.

Table 1. Total number of students using the lab.

1. No. of students attending the lab for tutorial appointments:	192
2. No. of students using the lab as a drop-in center:	214
3. No. of students using the self-instruction modules:	155
4. No. of students attending mini-courses:	331
5. No. of students taught by the lab's Traveling Teacher program:	<u>444</u>
TOTAL	1336

Table 2. No. of appointments required by students using the lab for regularly scheduled tutorial sessions.

<u>No. of appts. per student</u>	<u>No. of students</u>	<u>Total no. of appts.</u>
1	50	50
2	45	90
3	32	96
4	10	40
5	16	80
6	11	66
7	10	70
8	8	64

	8	
9	2	18
10	3	30
11	4	44
13	1	<u>13</u>
		TOTAL NO. OF APPTS. 661

Table 3. No. of drop-in sessions attended by students

<u>No. of sessions per student</u>	<u>No. of students</u>	<u>Total no. of sessions</u>
1	167	167
2	26	52
3	9	27
4	4	16
5	3	15
6	2	12
7	1	7
9	1	9
11	1	<u>11</u>
		TOTAL NO. OF DROP-IN SESSIONS 316

Table 4. No. of self-instruction modules used by students

<u>No. of modules</u>	<u>No. of students</u>	<u>No. of uses of modules</u>
1	95	95
2	33	66
3	12	36

	9	
4	7	28
5	1	5
6	2	12
8	1	8
9	1	9
10	2	20
11	1	<u>11</u>

TOTAL NO.
OF USES OF
MODULES 290

Table 5. Description by courses of students attending the lab for tutorial appointments, drop-in sessions, mini-courses, traveling teacher sessions and self-instruction modules.

Course No.	No. attending tutorial appts.	No. requesting drop-in help	No. attending mini-courses	No. attending traveling teacher sessions	No. using self-instruction modules	Totals
A. COMPOSITION COURSES						
English						
002	4	0	0	0	3	7
003	5	0	0	0	1	6
100	5	4	3	24	4	40
101	36	32	73	60	29	230
101I	7	4	0	0	4	15
101X	1	1	1	0	0	3
102	44	70	179	293	60	646
102G	6	2	1	17	3	29
102I	5	0	2	0	1	8
102M	35	14	8	50	29	136
103	0	1	1	0	1	3
420	4	16	2	0	2	24
421	2	0	0	0	0	2
B. OTHERS						
Other undergraduates	14	50	54	0	6	124
Other graduates	11	11	4	0	5	31

Other graduate
students prepar-
ing for English
Proficiency
Exams

	<u>13</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>32</u>
TOTALS	192	214	331	444	155	1336

Table 6. Description by school of students attending the lab

<u>School</u>	<u>% of total</u>
Agriculture	11%
CFS	9%
Engineering	18%
HSSE	20%
Management	16%
Pharmacy	1%
Science	18%
Technology	5%
Veterinary Medicine	1%
Other (including staff and unclassified students)	1%

C. EVALUATION OF STUDENTS' PROGRESS

1. Instructors' Evaluation of Students

In order to assess the quality of instruction received by students attending the lab and the degree of increased competence in these students' writing skills, the Writing Lab sent out seven-item evaluation questionnaires to the composition instructors for each of their students who attended the lab. A tally of the responses indicates that while 26% of the students needed only some help, 34% needed much help; and 40% needed a great deal of help. Responses to the question concerning subject mastery indicate that 90% of the students demonstrated definite improvement in the areas of writing skills studied in the lab, and the grades for 67% rose either one or two letter grades. Composition instructors also reported that 60% of the students indicated to their instructors that they appreciated the lab's help, and 64% of the students evaluated in this questionnaire showed noticeable improvement

in their confidence in themselves and their abilities. Of the students evaluated for motivation, 85% indicated an increased desire to write well. Responses to the question asking about feedback from the lab indicate that all of the instructors evaluated communication from the lab instructor as adequate to excellent. Finally, from those instructors whose students used self-instructional materials, 17% rated the modules as being of some help, 56% responded that they were of much help, and 22% reported that they were of great help.

2. Students' Evaluations of the Writing Lab

When students evaluated their work in the Writing Lab in a four-item questionnaire, 4% rated the quality of their instruction as adequate, 42% responded that it was clear and effective, and 54% reported that it was very clear and very effective. When asked to evaluate their progress in writing skills as a result of their lab work, 98% of the students reported definite improvement, and 78% stated that what they had learned in the lab enabled them to write better papers and receive higher letter grades. All of the students evaluated the quality of their lab instructors' help as adequate or better, with 66% reporting that their instructors were very helpful and very competent. In the space provided for further comments and suggestions, students repeatedly suggested that drop-in hours should be extended and more staff added. Of the students who used the lab's self-instruction materials, 32% rated the quality of instruction provided by the modules as adequate, 41% reported that it was clear and effective, and 22% responded that it was very clear and very effective. As a result of using these modules, 60% of the students noted some improvement in their writing skills while 34% reported a great deal of improvement.