

## 12 Working with Students

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Every student in the school eventually lands in the writing lab, the mainstreamed special education student as well as the academic honors student and everyone in between. It's departmental policy. With a school population of about 1,500 students, one full-time lab instructor, and an operating schedule of five periods per day, the lab may be working with virtually every kind of student on any given day, sometimes within the same period. So how does the lab instructor cope with the variety? In other words, how can the lab instructor offer individualized instruction to the entire spectrum of students and still maintain sanity?

The situation addressed here did not rely on the use of peer tutors. There were dozens of reasons, all the usual ones, but the end result was the same: the lab functioned under the guidance of one instructor. In order to do what the lab was designed to do, that is, offer individualized instruction in all areas of writing, whether for remediation, reinforcement, or enrichment, the approach demanded structure and organization.

First, structure. The facility limited visits to sixteen students at any given time. The sixteen came from one class or a combination of classes; teachers made appointments for their students as space was available. As a result, even though the classes were grouped homogeneously, the lab often received difficult-to-work-with combinations. So, again, structure. Teachers submitted a diagnostic sheet (these are sometimes completed by the students themselves), for each student visiting the lab. The diagnostic sheet, a list of fifty-four possible areas of need, allowed the teacher to merely check a specific item or, if the teacher preferred, to write a detailed note in the space provided. Thus, by checking the student's past record, including test scores and a narrative of previous lab visits, the lab instructor knew what to expect both in terms of ability and in terms of need.

Next, then, the organization. Understanding the students' needs enabled the lab instructor to make logical "assignments" for the lab

period. Assignments were made, materials readied, and all information placed at individual study carrels prior to the arrival of each group of students. Then, when students arrived, they found their own diagnostic sheets and seated themselves at their respective study carrels, ready to work.

The structure and organization prior to their visits enabled me to work simultaneously with all kinds of students. The final key that enabled both the lab and the lab instructor to survive, however, was the abundance of materials available. While we used a number of commercially prepared audio-tutorial programs, we also developed our own—two lessons on different levels for each of the fifty-four items on the diagnostic sheet. That was no small task, and we spent a year doing it. The results, however, were worth the effort. Each lesson included an instruction sheet that explained the rules or principles involved in the subject under study. Following the instruction sheet were two exercises, one at an easy-to-moderate level and one at an advanced level (not just more of the same, but requiring a more complicated thought process and a more sophisticated application of the lesson). Accompanying these printed materials was an audiocassette tape. Because all tapes were recorded extemporaneously, the lab instructor, for all practical purposes, was able to talk to the students via tape in the same manner as if talking to each individually. And, as a result, the tape didn't sound like someone reading a script. It wasn't. Instead, students heard comments like these: "Now, if you missed that one, you don't understand rule 3. Let's look at that rule again." Or "Watch it, now. This is where most of you goof up. Be sure to think through rule 8."

Now, for the individualized part. Some students were able to zip through the materials quickly, perhaps even skipping the first exercise. Others needed extra help with explanations and further examples before they could begin the first exercise. With no more than sixteen students at one time and taped material (which can be rewound and replayed for reinforcement or clarity), the situation permitted the lab instructor to work with every student on an individual basis without disrupting or causing others to wait. In general, during a regular class period, the lab instructor could talk individually with every student three times. If one individual needed a disproportionate amount of time, the lab instructor would leave to check on others' progress and return as often as necessary for as long as possible.

Rarely did students leave saying they had gained nothing. Obviously some gained more than others; some learn more quickly than others. Some needed to return to the lab the following day for additional

reinforcement; others grasped the concept by midway through the period. The flexibility of the materials and the structure allowed the instructor to provide additional materials for those who finished early. Usually the additional materials were those that the students themselves requested, based on their own perception of needs—needs often quite different, we discovered, than those isolated by the teacher.

While I am aware of the criticism offered by some about the use of audiotapes instead of total personal contact, I find the arguments primarily philosophical. After three years of statistical work, all of which was scrutinized by both local university personnel and the state department officials who represented the federal government under which the program was funded, I feel confident in saying we really can't argue with success. The approach we used improved students' writing skills significantly, especially when we considered only those skills for which the students visited the lab. Even students in the lower levels tended to "catch up." Perhaps the secret to our success rests in the development of our own materials. Certainly we as lab instructors need not reinvent the wheel in preparing lab materials. On the other hand, if we really want to work with every student individually and there is only one of us for sixteen of them, alternatives—especially realistic, proven ones—must suffice. Students enjoyed the taped lessons, responded positively toward them, and felt free to stop, rewind, replay, or—in the cases of some who were quick to learn—advance the tape. The audio-tutorial approach allowed students the flexibility of learning at their own pace. And after all, isn't that what individualized instruction is all about?

### Recommended Reading

Clark, Beverly. *Talking about Writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing without Teachers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

———. "The Loop Writing Process." In *Writing with Power*, 59–77. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Graves, Richard L., ed. *Rhetoric and Composition*. Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 1983. See Murray, 89–92; Podis, 252–57.

Olson, Gary A., ed. *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1984. See Bruffe, 3–14; Warnock and Warnock, 16–20; Olson, 92.

Provost, Gary. *Make Every Word Count*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1983.

*The Writing Lab Newsletter*.