

## 21 Community Connections

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The first time Marie came to the writing lab, she walked cautiously and slowly, clutching her purse and notebook to her chest. In a thin voice, she told the tutor, "The teacher sent me here to write."

The tutor asked, "What about?"

Marie said, "I don't know."

"Did you read the assignment?" the tutor probed.

"No," said Marie, looking worried.

"Well, then, I suggest you go back to class, read the assignment, and come back tomorrow prepared to write. I'll write a note to your teacher and issue you a pass, so you won't get in trouble."

That afternoon, the tutor inquired about the student to the teacher. Marie had been out of school for six months while she carried and delivered a baby. That day was her first back to school, and she was thoroughly confused about the work to be done. The next day, the tutor attempted to set Marie at ease and probed for a topic that interested the student: the new baby.

Marie attended the writing lab for five consecutive days, handing in her first written assignment of the year. On her last visit to the lab, as she glanced at her final draft of five days' work, she smiled to the tutor saying, "And I was so scared to write! Writing isn't that hard."

The anecdote about Marie serves to show that, at times, the writing lab, with its one-to-one tutoring, becomes a "halfway house" for students who have been absent from school for a long time. Perhaps Marie could have eventually caught up with her peers in class, but the writing lab gave her the individual help she needed to bridge the gap of the six-month absence. Moreover, the writing lab tutor, with patience, understanding, and knowledge of the writing process, guided her through the steps in writing, allowing Marie to become confident as a writer.

Developing confidence in student writers, providing a nonthreatening atmosphere in a writing place, and supporting the student in experi-

menting with the written word are part of what a writing lab offers. Tutors and lab directors who possess vision can extend the use of the writing lab to provide help not only for students and teachers, but also to the community. These ties to the community start once school opens in September. During the first open house, the writing lab is open and demonstrating its services. Tutors present a sample of a tutoring conference to visitors, so they can watch what goes on at the lab. The lab is also open during the parent-teacher conferences. As a matter of course, directors ask teachers to mention the writing lab and its merits to visiting parents who are interested in the scholastic welfare of their children. Shortly before these events, the director writes a short article for the local newspaper, school newspaper, local radio or television news. With proper planning, tutors get interviewed by a local television station or newspaper, thus educating the community about the free resources provided for their children by the school. Groups such as the PTA have also visited our lab, and after asking questions about its program, often mention to their children that they should attend. Parents' support strengthens the work of the writing lab.

To reach the local Board of Education, the Kenmore High School Writing Lab allowed the school system's communications crew to come into the lab and film students and tutors at work. They filmed students writing, collaborating, reading their papers aloud to each other; they interviewed the director; and they caught a tutoring session. This film was then shown to the local Board of Education at their next meeting. The disruption caused by the film crew that day was well worth it. Although not much tutoring got done, the Akron Board of Education proposed that each high school in the system have a writing lab within the next two years.

As the writing lab opens the door to students, teachers, and the whole school, it can also build bridges to the community. As spokespeople for the writing lab, tutors and directors speak to public groups such as Kiwanis, Lions Clubs, and Junior League about the advantages of the writing lab. There have been times when a professional in one of these groups offers support to the lab for a needed item that is unaffordable within the lab budget. Local companies in the computer field lend computers and software for students to try out.

Many community service groups sponsor annual writing contests, and they can use the writing lab as a center to distribute essays and use tutors as judges for these contests. This fall, the writing lab is helping students to write for the United Fund Contest and is urging Kenmore High School students to compete in the Lucille Loy Kuck Ohioana Award for Excellence in Creative Writing, as well as other

scholarship-winning writing awards. Moreover, winning entries are posted at the lab, where they are read by the winners to invited guests from the school and community. The writing lab, as the center of writing in a school, is the place to post information about writing contests and to sponsor and encourage those writing contests within the school and the community. The final touch is for the lab to also take part in encouraging writing by establishing prizes and creating writing contests that are open to students in the school. After the winners are chosen, the lab publishes their work through the local newspaper.

Students have seldom seen their writing in print. The writing lab photocopies prize-winning essays in booklet form to encourage winners to keep writing. Another tie between the writing lab and the community is to invite local professional writers to an afternoon of readings by the students, to answer questions about writing posed by interested students, or perhaps to critique some of the student writers' work.

There is a wealth of information in the writing lab, once it opens its doors to students, teachers, the school, and the community. There is also a wealth of information that can be tapped for research. Since the lab encourages experimentation with the written word, it is the obvious place to do research. School teachers learning about the writing process can tap that lode from as close as the school where they teach. Tutors, who are often college students or graduate students, can find the writing lab the topic needed for a research paper, an observation, ethnographic research, or a dissertation problem. The writing lab becomes then a resource to college students and universities. A writing lab director who keeps abreast of the latest published literature about writing labs can research a particular style of tutoring or a solution to a problem in writing; staff can gather information to present in a paper at one of the writing lab conferences held annually.

Writing no longer has to be an isolated activity. Writing is communication and collaboration. The writing lab, working along with the community, allows the students to participate in creating ties with the real world around them.