

9 Training of Professional Staff

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In spite of educators' knowledge about planning and preparation, we often seem to start new projects with the old "sink or swim" attitude. After four years of operation, we can safely say that our writing lab at Hazelwood West High School has learned to "swim," although the training of personnel has been haphazard, at best.

Much of the success of the writing labs in the three Hazelwood high schools has been due to careful planning of procedures and objectives before the labs opened in 1983. There was no personnel training in methods of tutoring, but at least all the teachers who were to staff the labs met in a one-week workshop in June to develop plans for the fall. The plans made at the workshop solved many problems that the professional staff would have faced as the labs started operating, and, therefore, allowed the teachers to concentrate on learning how to tutor effectively and how to use a computer for word processing.

At our summer workshop, we decided which students would constitute our clientele, how many students we could tutor in one class period, what the role of the labs would be in the total school writing program, what record keeping procedures we would follow, and what supplies and equipment we would need.

After much discussion, we decided that we would target for our clientele that first year both remedial students and those who needed enrichment. Students in English classes would be our primary targets for the first year, although we decided we would offer the services of the professional staff to teachers in other disciplines who asked for assistance in preparing writing assignments or who wanted a lab staff member to come to their classes and get the students started on writing assignments. We followed these plans rather faithfully during the first

year, but we learned very quickly that it was hard to tell an “enrichment” student from a “developmental” student, and we didn’t quibble over the ability level of any student who was referred to us by an English teacher.

Another important decision that was made in the summer workshop determined how students could get access to the labs. Since all our students must take six classes in a six-hour day, the only system that seemed feasible was a referral system. English teachers would decide when students needed some remediation or enrichment, sign them up to come to the lab, and send a referral form with them to tell the lab staff what the students were to work on. We also followed this plan carefully the first year, but we have since discovered that most students are really self-referrals, asking their English teachers or any other teacher they think will release them from class for passes to the lab. Most teachers don’t fill out referral forms any more; they rely on the students to tell us what they need to work on. (As you can imagine, sometimes a problem develops from this lack of communication with the teachers, but we have not had any serious repercussions.)

The second topic we discussed in our summer workshop concerned how many students the labs could effectively tutor in one class period. Each of the three labs is staffed by one English teacher and one teacher assistant, every period of the day. If our goal was to give individual assistance to students referred to us, we knew we had to set some limits on the number of students signed up for each hour. We finally decided to design a sign-up sheet that provided places for one week’s daily schedule. The space for each day is divided into six squares, one for each class period, and each period has space for six students’ names. We would try to help more if they showed up, but we hoped that, when teachers saw that all six spaces were filled, they would not send any more students. We also explained to the teachers in department meetings that sometimes two students would be capacity for us, if they were students with severe problems who really had to have one-to-one attention. To summarize, we set parameters, but we try to be as accommodating as possible and still provide quality instruction to individual students.

Developing a philosophical basis for our goals was probably the most important accomplishment of the summer workshop. We decided that we wanted to be more than just a tutoring service; we wanted to provide leadership for the total writing program of the school. We wanted to foster a positive attitude toward writing among the students. Therefore, we agreed to accept and publicize all announcements about writing contests; to buy and maintain a professional library of resources

about teaching writing; to use computers for word processing; to send letters to the parents of all students who came to the labs for the first time, telling them about the new service the school was offering students; to promote writing across the curriculum; and to participate in professional writing conferences whenever possible.

We have continued to carry out all these functions and have added a few more. At Hazelwood West High School, we now sponsor a writing club, which publishes a literary magazine and conducts an all-school writing contest with cash prizes each year. In all three labs, computers now play a much larger role, since we now have enough for a class of twenty-five to work at the same time. The increase in computer activity has made us much more conscious of the importance of having a philosophical basis because it would be very easy to become simply a computer lab. With our goals clearly in mind, we try very hard to maintain tutoring as our reason for being and improving writing as our major goal. We still insist that it is essential to have as a staff member an English teacher who knows writing theory and not capitulate to a few administrators' suggestions that a teacher-clerk who knows how to use computers could run the labs.

Next, we turned our attention to record keeping and what procedures we would follow to obtain the information we would need for records. Those procedures are explained in detail in chapter 14 of this book, but to summarize briefly, we decided that extensive record keeping would be beneficial for two reasons. First, a new program nearly always has to be justified after its initial year. We needed records to justify our existence. Second, we needed records to help us evaluate our program. From our records we can see how many students we are serving in each of the ability categories (remedial, developmental, and enrichment). We can see how many students are entering writing contests, which teachers are referring students, what classes most of the students come from, and what departments make use of the lab. From this information, we can make adjustments in our program.

Finally, in that summer planning session, we made decisions about what supplies and equipment we would need. In addition to the computer, disk drives, and printer, and the supplies necessary to run them (paper and disks, software), we needed books for students' reference and books on writing theory and practice for teachers. We also asked the district printing shop to print some posters on the offset press for us to use in the high schools to promote the writing labs. The printing shop also printed on NCR paper the forms for the records we wanted to keep carbons of. We listed as necessary equipment a filing cabinet, desks for the staff, a bookcase, and chairs and tables

for students. When school started in the fall, all of these supplies and equipment were ready for us.

Other School Districts

Several school districts in the metropolitan St. Louis area, of which Hazelwood is a part, now have some form of writing lab. When Hazelwood opened its three labs in 1983, only one other one existed in the county, and it was started the same year. As codirector of the Gateway Writing Project (part of the National Writing Project), I have been in touch with staff in most of the new labs. What I have seen in the way of professional staff development has been similar to the Hazelwood experience, except that most of the other schools don't seem to have the paid week of summer planning. What is happening is that most of the teachers chosen to staff the labs have extensive training and experience in teaching writing. Many have been through the Gateway Writing Project summer institute. In the Parkway School District, for example, writing labs have been or are in the process of being established in at least two high schools. The teacher chosen to direct the one at Parkway South High School attended the institute last summer, visited the lab at my school, and consulted with me extensively before school started in 1986. Teachers from Parkway West have also been to visit our lab, and one of them attended the summer institute in 1985. The department chair and the first director of the Pattonville High School writing center were both Gateway-trained people. At Langston Middle School, in the city of St. Louis, the staff members who direct the two writing labs are both Gateway alumnae.

So what I am seeing in this area is not training on how to run writing labs, but training in the form of writing theory and practice. I believe that is exactly how it should be. The staff of each individual lab must work out procedures that will suit the particular needs and restrictions of their school. While planning time similar to what we had in Hazelwood is desirable, what is most essential is simply to choose staff members who have studied recent research and theory and know how to adapt what they have learned to the teaching of writing. They will learn quickly what they need to know about running a lab.