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ABSTRACT

A course designed for college students with severe writing problems, especially those stemming from nonstandard speech patterns, was adapted to a variety of noncollege settings: two high schools, a labor union, a manpower training program, and the staff education department of a psychiatric hospital. Each setting attempted to integrate classroom instruction in rhetoric and syntax with laboratory autotutorial work on standard written English. Success was limited at the union sites by participants' lack of motivation to improve their writing skills, at the high school sites by students' lack of motivation and difficulty in managing self-instruction, and at the manpower site by administrative instability. A successful continuing adaptation model, however, was established among the highly motivated workers at the psychiatric hospital. An evaluation of project results indicates that adapted models of the course would succeed in efficiently operated social service agencies and in stable job training programs committed to developing literacy skills. Any model designed for learners of high school age and younger, however, would require an in-depth revision of materials and procedures and a reorganization of the curriculum.
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FINAL REPORT

Developing New Models of the COMP-LAB College Basic Writing Course for Other Settings

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DEVELOPING NEW MODELS OF THE COMP-LAB BASIC WRITING COURSE FOR OTHER SETTINGS

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A. Project Overview

This project has adapted a successful college basic writing program, the COMP-LAB course at York College/CUNY, to a variety of non-college settings. The college model was designed for students with the most severe writing problems, particularly those stemming from nonstandard speech patterns. Its innovative approach integrated instruction in rhetoric and syntax, offered in the classroom, with autotutorial work on standard written English, offered in a laboratory. In the adaptation project, new models of this course were developed for two high schools, a labor union, a manpower training program, and the staff education department of a psychiatric hospital. Adaptations at all sites were in some measure successful, but more so where learners were more experienced in managing their own learning, where they had stronger and more tangible motives for improving their writing skills, and where institutional commitment and flexibility were more clearly present.

B. Purpose

The writing instruction which members of minority groups receive in urban high schools is often inadequate. Many secondary school graduates go directly from the classroom to the job market, where they are unable to advance because of their limited basic skills, particularly in writing. Programs offered by employers and neighborhood-based continuing education programs to remedy these deficiencies are often untested and ill-adapted to the populations they are meant to serve. Teaching writing to these learners demands specialized knowledge and training, expertise which during the past decade has been developed at some colleges and universities, but which remains mostly limited to institutions of higher education. Extending these improvements in basic writing instruction to high schools and job-related settings suggests one likely solution to the problem of poor writing skills among minority group members outside the college classroom. Such programs may also be less costly than similar college-based programs and may have more immediate impact on the employability of disadvantaged learners.

C. Background and Origins

The COMP-LAB basic writing course at York College/CUNY was developed by Professors Mary Epes, Carolyn Kirkpatrick, and Michael Southwell, and was supported by a two-year grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (1977-79), supplemented by a one-year grant from the Exxon Education Foundation for its evaluation. To meet the needs of students with severe writing problems, most of whom have nonstandard English or foreign language backgrounds, we developed this two-part course, with a classroom component (where instruction in rhetoric and syntax is provided) and a laboratory component (where systematic autotutorial instruction in written correctness is provided). The results of the

Exxon-supported evaluation showed that the COMP-LAB course in one semester could effect significant decrease in students' error rates and significant improvement in their overall writing quality; that students had overwhelmingly favorable attitudes towards the lab; and that the course provided administrative flexibility and institutional cost-savings. These outcomes suggested that our program could be useful in non-college settings.

D. Project Description

Following are descriptions of models developed at each site.

Bronx Psychiatric Center. Like most service agencies, the Bronx Psychiatric Center has an acute need for improved on-the-job writing among its paraprofessional employees (mostly black and Hispanic). Also many of these employees are seeking admission to, or are already enrolled in the associate degree program which the hospital (in cooperation with Bronx Community College/CUNY) operates on its grounds. However, some are unable to enroll, or have difficulty in their course work because of their problems with writing. To address these needs, Epes, the project director taking responsibility for this site, in collaboration with the directors of the hospital's staff education program, developed four adaptation models of the COMP-LAB course: an entirely self-instructional laboratory model open to all members of the hospital staff on a voluntary basis (a popular and successful effort); a college-preparatory model similar to the York prototype course (also successful but offered only one semester for administrative reasons); a model with some tutorial support mandated for occupational therapy aides (a model strongly resisted by these "draftees" and so abandoned after one semester); and another exclusively autotutorial model required for all therapy aides in training (another successful model which, like the volunteer program, is still in operation at the hospital). Evaluation indicated that enrollees noticeably improved their writing, and that overall success at this site can be attributed to the maturity of the learners, their clear motivation to improve their writing, and the enthusiastic and informed cooperation of the staff education department personnel.

High School Sites. Models of the COMP-LAB course were designed by Kirkpatrick in cooperation with faculty members at Charles Evans Hughes, an inner city public high school in Manhattan, and at August Martin, a magnet public high school in Queens. Both schools were motivated to improve the writing skills of their students (almost entirely minority group members) by the initiation of the Regents Competency Tests in Writing, a diploma requirement introduced in 1980. Because of severely limited facilities, the experimental program at Hughes was initially designed to be entirely classroom-based, but in the second year of the program, funding unrelated to this project made it possible for the school to develop writing lab classes, with enrollment limited to 20, for students in greatest need; two teachers used the COMP-LAB exercises systematically in their lab classes. At August Martin High School, the program was more closely modeled on that at York College, with both a classroom and a coordinated lab component. Two cooperating teachers taught a course focussed exclusively on writing skills, and students were released from class one day a week to work on the lab materials in a supervised writing resource center. The development of programs focused on writing at the high school level was highly successful; the success of transfer of the

experimental laboratory approach was more limited. Evaluation suggested that high school learners had difficulty in managing self-instruction; other perhaps equally important reasons for limited success were scheduling rigidity, lack of reward for increased effort by cooperating teachers, and the fact that our program focussed on instructional needs that at the high school level are important, but not dominant.

Other Sites. At ILGWU Local 62-32, the first of two sites for which Southwell assumed responsibility, learners worked independently in a lab setting, without supervision, but with some feedback from a teacher who was hired to check those parts of the lab work they could not check themselves. Since enrollees had no strong external motivation to master writing skills, this model was, on the whole, unsuccessful. At the second site, East Harlem CETA II-B, a manpower training program, courses in literacy skills were already in place, and the COMP-LAB course reinforced their goals--to prepare enrollees for positions requiring such skills. The model developed was quite similar to that at York College, with coordinated classroom and lab components. Unfortunately, the smooth functioning of the program was severely hampered in its final phase by considerable administrative instability. Interviews indicated that learners had strongly positive attitudes toward the COMP-LAB program at both sites, but because only a few completed the exercises at one site and at the other the host agency was closed down, no evaluation of writing improvement was feasible.

E. Outcomes and Impacts

Major outcomes of our adaptation project were: (1) the establishment of one successful continuing adaptation model, the Bronx hospital program; (2) insights into how to adapt the COMP-LAB course to many kinds of learners and learning situations--insights which have helped the directors improve the program as it functions at their home college and at other college sites, and which may be useful in the development of additional models of the course in non-college settings; (3) impetus to further research on the reasons for the effectiveness of the COMP-LAB method of teaching written-language skills, especially to nonstandard dialect speakers.

F. Summary and Conclusions

In considering the possibility of future adaptations of the COMP-LAB course, or of similar college courses, it is important to pay particular attention to the suitability of the course to the population at hand. Also necessary are a stable setting and external motivation for both learners and personnel responsible for the program. There is every reason to believe that adapted models of the COMP-LAB course would succeed in efficiently-operated social service agencies and in stable job-training programs committed to developing literacy skills. Any model designed for learners of high school age and younger, however, would require in-depth revision of materials and procedures (while maintaining the COMP-LAB's basic conceptual framework), and also an openness on the part of school administrators to innovation entailing major reorganization of curriculum, as well as funds to support such major changes.

DEVELOPING NEW MODELS OF THE COMP-LAB COLLEGE BASIC WRITING COURSE FOR OTHER SETTINGS

Project Overview

This project has adapted a successful college basic writing program, the COMP-LAB course at York College/CUNY, to a variety of non-college settings. The college model was designed for students with severe writing problems, particularly those stemming from nonstandard speech patterns. Its innovative approach integrated instruction in rhetoric and syntax, offered in the classroom, with autotutorial work on standard written English, offered in a lab. In the adaptation project, new models of this project were developed for two high schools, a labor union, a manpower training program, and the staff education department of a psychiatric hospital.

Adaptations at all sites were in some measure successful, but more so where learners were more experienced in managing their own learning (since the approach is largely self-instructional), and where they had stronger and more tangible motives for improving their writing skills. Institutional commitment and flexibility also played a key role in the relative success of each model. Specifically, the outcomes of the project suggest that (1) efforts to establish a basic writing program, even a highly flexible, effective, and economical one like the COMP-LAB course, are not likely to succeed at profit-oriented business sites; (2) the success of such efforts at most urban high schools, despite the strong pressure on teachers and students to improve writing skills, will probably be limited by institutional inflexibility and younger learners' difficulties in handling self-instruction; (3) such efforts are most likely to succeed in service-oriented agencies where learners are more mature and where the clear need for good writing skills on the job insures both individual and institutional commitment to the program; and (4) success in neighborhood training programs is also likely but less predictable, depending both on the career-orientation of enrollees and the relative expertise of program managers.

Purpose

The writing instruction which members of minority groups receive in urban high schools, overwhelmed as they are by large classes and faculty cutbacks, is often inadequate. Many of these students go directly from high school to the job market, where they are unable to advance because of their limited basic skills. Even if competent in the work they are doing, these workers cannot be promoted because of their inability to prepare the simplest reports and memoranda. Employers are sometimes

willing, and even eager, to underwrite courses for their educationally disadvantaged workers, but the programs they can offer are frequently untested and ill-adapted to the populations they are meant to serve. Some workers take the initiative and enroll themselves in neighborhood-based continuing education classes. Such programs proliferate, but are usually unable to make a real contribution to writing improvement. Teaching writing to these learners demands specialized knowledge and approaches. Not only is writing the most difficult of the basic skills for all learners to master, but the problems are compounded for speakers of nonstandard English (as most minority group workers are).

Since the late sixties, however, serious intellectual attention has been given to improving the writing skills of nontraditional students. Some breakthroughs have occurred; new and more effective approaches and programs have been developed and are being disseminated. But with few exceptions these have been limited to colleges and universities. The transfer of such a proven research-based program to job-related settings and high schools suggests one likely solution to the problem of providing effective instruction in writing skills to minority group members outside the college classroom. Such programs may also be less costly than similar college-based programs and may have more immediate impact on the employability of disadvantaged learners. This project investigated the transferability of one such course.

Background and Origins

The COMP-LAB basic writing course at York College/CUNY had been developed by Professors Mary Epes, Carolyn Kirkpatrick, and Michael Southwell, under a prior two-year grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (1977-79), supplemented by a one-year grant from the Exxon Education Foundation for its evaluation.

The COMP-LAB Program was designed specifically for students who enter college with the most serious writing problems, most of whom have nonstandard English or foreign language backgrounds, and almost all of whom are members of minority groups. To meet their needs, we developed a two-part course, with a classroom component (where instruction in rhetoric and syntax is provided) and a laboratory component (where instruction in written correctness is provided). In the classroom, group instruction in composing is supplemented by heavy emphasis on free writing, to develop fluency. In the laboratory, students work by themselves, using our self-instructional materials. Course materials provide for careful coordination of classroom and laboratory work.

It is the autotutorial laboratory component of the course which

is most distinctive. Both theory and practice suggest that self-instruction is the ideal mode in which to provide instruction in the forms, structures, and conventions of standard written English. Rather than receiving instruction from a teacher or tutor, students in the college program work on their own (under the supervision of lab personnel). Students are assigned to one laboratory module a week, each focussed on a single grammatical feature or syntactic problem. Most modules begin with a brief audiotape introduction that stresses the differences between speech and writing, and teaches the basic principle which is the focus of the module. A carefully structured set of written exercises follows, offering students substantial practice in writing. Techniques such as sentence combining and controlled composition require students to manipulate a grammatical feature in increasingly complicated contexts, thus internalizing the rule and moving them closer to control of that feature in their own writing. Exercises have been designed so that students can do and check them on their own, working at their own pace. Students' mastery of the laboratory practice is monitored in the writing they do for the course. The autotutorial approach also helps students develop valuable study skills, helps them attain the perceptual skills they need, and offers substantial flexibility for learners, instructors, and administrators.

During the second year of the COMP-LAB Project, the course was transferred to two other college settings (and since then the laboratory exercises and autotutorial approach have been adopted and adapted by many writing programs and laboratories in colleges across the country). During that year, a course evaluation, supported by Exxon Education Foundation, was conducted by Formative Evaluation Research Associates, Inc., of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Analysis of evaluation findings showed the following:

- * significant decrease in rates at which errors occurred in the writing of students using the COMP-LAB approach;
- * significant improvement in their overall writing quality;
- * overwhelmingly favorable attitudes toward the lab;
- * for teachers, little difficulty using the lab system;
- * increased flexibility in administering the remedial writing program; and
- * institutional cost-savings effected through a reduction in teacher contact time for students using the lab as part of the course.

These evaluation outcomes suggested to us that the COMP-LAB course was strong in the characteristics necessary for successful adaptation to non-college settings, provided that learners at these settings had needs similar to those enrolled in our basic writing program at York.

Project Description

In developing the COMP-LAB course, our starting point had been a specific population of students. We had identified the needs of this population of writers, the content appropriate to those needs, and the learning strategies appropriate both to that content and to the psychology of the learners. In any adaptation of the course, we considered it essential that (1) the learners' writing should be characterized by nonstandard features; (2) the basic instructional approach to learning correct grammatical forms should be autotutorial; and (3) our laboratory materials could be used without major revision. However, we were prepared to adapt all other components of the course to a wide range of differing goals among the learners and conditions at the sites where the models would be adopted.

In view of these considerations, the following sites were selected initially as apparently suitable settings for our adaptations of the COMP-LAB course: the Staff Education Program of the Bronx Psychiatric Center, August Martin and Charles Evans Hughes High Schools, and Consolidated Edison Company, all in New York City. However, after several months, it seemed doubtful that the materials and approach were appropriate to the needs of a sufficient number of Con Edison's employees and that its management's commitment to the project was sufficient to support it. So at that time, two complementary alternative sites, Local 62-32 of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union and an East Harlem CETA training program, were chosen to replace Con Edison.

As we began work on adapting the college course at the various sites, it became clear that the component of the course most critical to adaptation was the autotutorial laboratory. In the college setting, the laboratory had always received strong support from the classroom component of the course, since teachers were able to monitor and reinforce the instruction which had been going on in the lab. Now we had to examine whether it would be possible for the laboratory to stand alone, or at least with less support than the college model of the course provides. How much support it was necessary to provide, and the nature of that support, have varied from site to site, depending on the character and resources of each. Figure 1 (on p. 5) indicates the comparative range of these resources.

Y O R K		B P C	A M	C E H	C E T A	I L G W U	C E
+	learners deficient in writing skills	+	+	+	+	+	?
+	reward system for learners who demonstrate improved writing skills	+	+	+	+	-	+
+	writing skills training already exists	+	+	+	+	-	-
+	internal initiative for change	+	+	+	+	-	+
+	commitment of administrative personnel to new program	+	+	?	+	+	?
+	commitment of instructional personnel to new program	N	+	+	-	N	N
+	facilities available for new program	+	+	?	+	+	?
+	support personnel available for new program	+	?	?	+	-	?

- YORK = York College
- BPC = Bronx Psychiatric Center
- AM = August Martin High School
- CEH = Charles Evans Hughes High School
- CETA = East Harlem Ceta II-B
- ILGWU = Local 62-32, ILGWU
- CE = Consolidated Edison Company

- + = exists
- = does not exist
- ? = existence uncertain
- N = not applicable

Figure 1: Resource Inventory of College and Non-College Sites



Following are descriptions of the development of models at each site.

Bronx Psychiatric Center

Since the mid-1960s, the Bronx Psychiatric Center has been serving the mental health needs of the entire Bronx. Its employees include approximately 600 therapy aides and 80 nurses, besides psychiatrists and social work and maintenance staffs. Because of its location in the North Bronx, its paraprofessional staff is composed largely of minority groups, mostly black and Hispanic.

The Staff Education Department at B.P.C., in collaboration with Bronx Community College/CUNY, operates an associate degree program mainly for hospital personnel. Many of the required courses, like freshman composition, are taught on the Center's grounds. Also, non-credit courses are offered by the Staff Education Department to all hospital employees recommended by their supervisors, and a 200-hour training program is required for mental health therapy trainees. Employees enrolled in these programs are given released time to attend classes.

Like most service agencies, the Bronx Psychiatric Center has an acute need for writing competency among its employees, even on the lowest rung of its career ladder. The hospital staff relies on reports written by case workers and other social work paraprofessionals at the Center and in affiliated agencies. Therapy aides and nurses must interview patients, observe them, and write reports on their responses and behavior. Errors in syntax and word forms can seriously interfere with the clarity of these reports, and hence with the action to be taken on behalf of patients. Poorly written reports have sometimes been a source of embarrassment and concern during the yearly visit of the hospital accrediting agency. Further, many hospital employees are interested in admission to the associate degree program, but don't write well enough to be admitted to the required freshman composition course. Other students already enrolled in the degree program continue to have problems with writing in their courses.

To address these wide-ranging needs for improved writing skills, in Fall 1979, Mary Epes, the project director taking responsibility for this site, in collaboration with the directors of the hospital's staff education program, completed preparations for a variety of different models of the COMP-LAB course. With the clerical and financial assistance of the hospital, a classroom in the Staff Education area was set up as a lab and supplied with files of exercises (later in a revised workbook format) and tape recorders; directors and secretaries were trained in lab procedures; new COMP-LAB forms were developed; and special writing tests were devised to give

enrollees the opportunity to apply what they had learned in the lab to the kind of writing they did on the job.

In the course of the project four models were developed at B.P.C.:

(1) Volunteer model. All hospital employees were invited to enroll in a self-contained lab program on a voluntary basis. The hospital agreed to release enrollees from their regular duties for any two convenient hours each week so that they could work on their own in the self-instructional laboratory. Each enrollee was permitted to complete the modules on an individually arranged schedule. Staff Education Department personnel were available during lab hours (8 AM to 5 PM) to supervise enrollees' work and to monitor their progress. The enrollees were also free to request individual assistance while working in the lab. A "hot line" phone to the Staff Education office facilitated communication with the directors, and brief bi-weekly reports, prepared by secretaries and directors, gave enrollees feedback on their performance. This volunteer model, launched in January 1980, enrolled 27 employees, mostly mental health therapy aides, in its first semester. More than half of this group completed (or almost completed) the program, despite initial scheduling difficulties. This model operated successfully during the period of the grant, and afterwards. Currently (Fall 1983), about a half dozen new applicants are accepted into the program each semester.

(2) College-preparation model. At the same time that the volunteer model was initiated, employees and neighborhood applicants who had recently enrolled in the Bronx Community College degree program and who needed improvement in basic writing skills were invited to join a special group for which the Staff Education Department directors provided one hour a week of classroom instruction coordinated with the lab work. Enrollees were required to complete the modules on a regular college semester schedule and to write essays weekly on assigned topics. This model was immediately and dramatically successful. All those who regularly attended the class hour and also completed the modules passed their qualifying writing exam successfully and were placed in the regular college composition course. However, despite this success (or rather, because of it), the experiment was not repeated; the Staff Education Program director feared that if the classroom course were offered regularly to new college enrollees, it would reduce expected enrollment in the college remedial program.

(3) "Draftee" model. The director of the Rehabilitation Center at the hospital became interested in the COMP-LAB program because occupational therapy aides are required to write even

more frequent and detailed patient reports than aides in other departments. In Fall 1980, twelve aides who were particularly deficient in basic writing skills were identified and assigned to the course. Despite efforts to boost morale, and the availability of one-on-one tutorial assistance, the model had little success; aides protested the assignment and only a few did much work in the program.

(4) Trainees' model. In the late fall of 1980, the hiring freeze which had been imposed on the hospital in 1979 was lifted. As we had planned before the freeze was imposed, the director of nursing education made the COMP-LAB course part of the 200-hour training program which each newly hired aide must complete successfully in order to qualify for continued employment. (Those few with good writing skills were exempt from the COMP-LAB requirement.) Since most trainees, after a few weeks on the job, are assigned to evening or night shifts, new and even more flexible procedures had to be devised for this model. A network of communication and feedback was set up to keep trainees motivated and aware of deadlines as they moved through the modules on their own. The first group of 22 new employees was oriented to COMP-LAB procedures in January 1981, and during the following spring two additional groups were set up, for a total of 40 trainees in the program at the end of the grant period. Since then, several new groups of newly hired aides who are deficient in writing skills, ranging from eight to twelve in each group, have been enrolled. This model appears to offer the most tangible benefits to the hospital and the best hope of long-term institutionalization.

High School Sites

Experimental writing programs were designed in Fall 1979 by Carolyn Kirkpatrick in cooperation with faculty members at Charles Evans Hughes High School in Manhattan, and at August Martin High School in Queens, and began operation in February 1980. Both high schools had a student population composed almost entirely of minority group members, many with academic deficiencies. And in both cases, faculty members at the site had initiated the first contact, since for all high schools in New York State, a general concern about the low level of students' writing skills had become highly specific with the institution of the new Regents Competency Tests in Writing, a diploma requirement introduced in 1980.

In other ways the two schools offered an interesting contrast to one another. Charles Evans Hughes was an inner-city high school with many problems endemic to such schools: overcrowding, limited facilities and supplies, poor student discipline, serious truancy, etc. These problems were on the rise during the two years of the program; and in 1982, the high school was closed by the New York City Board of Education. In contrast,

August Martin High School was a magnet school with selective admissions and special programs in aviation and communication. Attendance records were among the best in the city, student and faculty morale were good, and physical resources were adequate.

Charles Evans Hughes High School. The experimental program at Hughes was designed to be classroom based, calling on a minimum of extra resources and making a minimum of extra demands on the teacher. In Spring 1980, three sections of tenth-grade students--two Regular sections and one General (that is, students well below grade level in reading)--had a two-period lab component built into their regular English class each week. On those two days, they worked on the COMP-LAB materials in their usual classroom, under their teacher's guidance. Materials were provided in single-sheet format, stored in folders in a large filing cabinet in the classroom. No tape-recorders were available; the teacher provided the class with an introduction to the conceptual material in each module. Students worked on five modules of the exercises over a full semester, doing each module in its entirety, and proceeding at their own pace. The single-sheet format exercises posed large problems for the teacher, who was struggling with classes averaging 34 (sometimes difficult) students, and often more at the beginning of a semester. In the subsequent Fall, the exercises were used with Regular sections only, and having become available in a revised workbook format, were used in that way, which proved to be more practical in that setting. (Students worked from the book to their own paper, as is customary in New York City high schools, where students do not own their texts.) Also, new Board of Education funding for pupils with special educational needs in the area of writing made it possible for the cooperating teacher to become a writing resource teacher for the school. A second teacher joined the experimental program, and the first teacher supported her in the classroom on days that students were doing the self-instructional work. "Check points" were introduced, specific exercises in the modules where students asked one of the teachers to confirm the accuracy of their work before they went on.

In Spring 1981, the new Board of Education funding made it possible for Charles Evans Hughes to run 15 writing lab classes, with enrollment limited to 20 students per class; students in greatest need (from Grades 9 through 12) took these labs in addition to their regularly scheduled English course. The two teachers who had used the exercises in their English classes both used them systematically in the new lab program.

In both whole-class and lab use at Hughes, students registered positive feelings about the self-instructional work, though some felt it was "too easy." In the classroom, using the workbook proved more practical than using single-sheet exercises, but it

became evident that a teacher had to be committed beyond the call of duty (or have extra teaching assistance, or both) to make the autotutorial approach function smoothly with a large class. In the writing lab classes, the autotutorial approach was more practical, and students' ability to work alone on the self-instructional exercises did indeed free the teacher to give more individual attention. However, the truly important factor in the success of these classes was probably the greatly reduced class size, not the use of self-instruction.

August Martin High School. The program at August Martin was more closely modeled after that at York College in offering from the beginning a course focused solely on developing writing skills, one component of which was lab work offered in a physically separate setting. The school year was divided into four cycles, rather than two semesters, so the curriculum for a single cycle had to be carefully defined. Two cooperating teachers instituted the program at August Martin and were active throughout the project.

In Spring 1980 (Cycle 3), each of the two cooperating teachers taught two sections of a special College Skills Workshop class. Students included eleventh- and twelfth-graders chosen largely on the basis of a writing sample showing problems with correctness. Classroom work focused on two of the Regents Competency tasks, the business letter and short essay. A Writing Resource Center was established in a small room, on the model of other independent study centers in the school, to serve as the laboratory site. Lab materials used in this first cycle were limited to a selection from two modules dealing with nouns and verbs; students were expected to cover set assignments each week. Tape-recorders and headsets were obtained; audiotapes and single-sheet exercise materials were stored in boxes on open shelves in the Resource Center, where students could obtain materials as they needed them. Classes of 20-28 students were divided into three groups. Each group was released from class one day a week to work in the Resource Center, where teachers supervised their work during hours that would ordinarily have been devoted to other similar administrative or supervisory tasks.

All involved in the initial cycle considered the ten-week term too short. Accordingly, two "advanced" groups were formed and monitored during Cycle 4, along with two more beginners' groups. During the second year, the writing program was run entirely as a two-cycle sequence (with four to five classes each cycle), which permitted more effective planning of the curriculum. And in the second year, the new Board of Education funding made it possible for the school to develop a larger Writing Resource Center. One of the two cooperating teachers moved to a full-time role in the new center, while a third teacher joined this program and offered the writing skills course. In the

two-cycle sequence, the use of the COMP-LAB materials was expanded to include a selection from five modules. However, since students averaged at best an hour a week in the Writing Resource Center, they did not do any module in its entirety. Special assignment sheets and lab forms were devised to help guide students' work. The classroom curriculum became, as it evolved, more developmental in its emphasis (as opposed to simply remedial), and instruction aimed specifically at the writing tasks posed by the Regents Competency Examination gave way to a broader emphasis on developing composing skills.

The program seemed to work well for both teachers and students. Although it was sometimes hard for teachers to handle the rotating small-group schedule, the extra burden of planning was offset by the benefits of the smaller class size and ability to offer individual help. The results of cooperative planning between teachers were one of the most gratifying results for participants. And despite their position as "draftees" on the basis of need, students consistently expressed positive feelings about the program. Teachers remarked that student attendance and pass rates were superior to those in regular English classes. (However, there was no way to obtain data to verify this impression.)

Other Sites

Consolidated Edison Company of New York. Although individual staff members of Con Edison's Education Division expressed considerable interest in reorganizing the existing writing improvement program on the COMP-LAB model, the bureaucracy of the company is cumbersome, and it proved impossible to gain the high-level administrative approval which would be necessary for a timely and successful program. Therefore, in May 1980 we abandoned plans to include Con Edison among the transfer sites.

Local 62-32, International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. The ILGWU has had a long history of concern for the educational welfare of its members. Accordingly, the education director of Local 62-32 in New York City strongly supported the development of a writing skills course on the COMP-LAB model. A laboratory was established and equipped, and a course was developed in which learners were given a series of assignments in the lab. Michael Southwell provided an orientation and introduction to the course, but otherwise there was no teacher associated with it. Learners worked independently and without supervision, at times convenient to them, in the lab. The teacher of another existing course was hired to check those parts of the lab work which learners could not check themselves.

One group of learners took the course during the March-September

1980 period, and another during the October 1980-March 1981 period. The results of this project were distinctly mixed. Of the approximately 25 members of the local in the two groups, only two completed the full course. Some of the learners who signed up for the course in fact never did any of the assigned work. But, in interviews with Southwell, all who did do any work expressed appreciation for the opportunity, satisfaction with what they were doing, and confidence that they were learning. It appears, then, there were individual successes; but on the whole the project must be called unsuccessful.

In some ways the union adaptation was the most difficult of any reported here, because the site had fewer resources than any of the others. Although members demonstrated the kinds of writing deficiencies which are susceptible to improvement by working on the COMP-LAB materials, they do not customarily engage in on-the-job writing; typically, they are machine operators, with no need at all for writing skills. Many are recent immigrants with little or poor knowledge of the English language, a problem the COMP-LAB materials are not designed to deal with. Whatever motivation these learners may have had for improving their writing was entirely personal; writing skills are not required on their jobs. In the union's educational program, there was no writing course to support the lab work, and this fact seems to have had a negative effect on the motivation of the learners. Typically, they worked alone in the lab, without supervisory or instructional personnel, and sometimes even without any fellow learners. Despite this isolation, they reported that they always felt in control of what they were supposed to be doing, almost always found it interesting, and usually considered it helpful.

Because of the small number of workers completing the assigned work, no formal evaluation of writing was carried out at the ILGWU site.

East Harlem CETA II-B. This manpower training program was operated by Mobicentrics, Inc., jointly with the East Harlem Council for Community Improvement, under a contract with the New York City Department of Employment. Its mission was to train clients from many of New York City's poorest neighborhoods in job skills, basic literacy skills, and work attitudes, and then to place them in entry-level positions with local employers. This transfer site offered a clientele with an obvious need for writing skills, an administration and a faculty with an apparent commitment to providing instruction in writing skills, and an educational structure (facilities and personnel) already in place. It was thus not difficult to modify an existing basic language skills course to include a laboratory on the COMP-LAB model. The grammar portion of students' regular class assignments was diverted to the lab. The regular teacher supervised their work, and checked those portions which students

were unable to check themselves. This course was eventually used by nearly 100 students, in two different cycles. In interviews with their teacher and Southwell, most of the students expressed enthusiasm about what they were doing.

The smooth functioning of the program was severely hampered, however, by considerable administrative instability. The Education Director and the Executive Director both left within four months of the beginning of the program, and the teacher assigned to the course suddenly and unexpectedly resigned to take a position outside the country, at a time when it was impossible for Southwell to provide any training to her replacement. In fact, the agency was in such turmoil that its contractor closed it shortly after the second cycle, at about the time of the expiration of the grant period. This ended what had been a reasonably well-functioning program, and made it impossible to get enough data to make any evaluation of changes in the learners' writing performance. It should be noted, though, that (judging from the reactions of both students and teacher) the program was successful as long as it was in operation. This was probably because the site was the most similar of all those in the project to a traditional college setting, thus making it relatively easy to integrate the laboratory facility into the existing educational structure.

Outcomes and Impact

Bronx Psychiatric Center

Papers. In a blind reading, the Staff Education Department directors compared pre- and post-papers of enrollees in the COMP-LAB program. In general, both ward reports and essays written for college courses showed noticeable improvement. In the trainees' program, specifically, the results were as follows: 69% improved, and 44% improved dramatically; of the eleven individuals who showed no change or declined slightly, all but one had fairly good writing skills at the start of the program, and perhaps had little to learn from it. The most noticeable improvement was among the poorest writers: of the fifteen individuals who were writing unacceptable or borderline pre-reports, all but one wrote acceptable post-reports. These results are compatible with the findings of the Exxon-supported evaluation of the COMP-LAB basic writing course in college settings.

Interviews. Epes conducted lengthy interviews with fourteen randomly chosen participants. There was almost 100% agreement among respondents that the work was enjoyable and relevant to their writing needs. All stressed that they liked working on their own, and that the incidental help given by the Staff Education Department personnel was sufficient for them to work

productively by themselves in the lab.

The directors of the Staff Education Department were also enthusiastic about the program. Specifically, they felt that the content of the modules is highly relevant to the writing needs of the B.P.C. employees, and that the self-instructional approach is uniquely suitable to the learning styles of adults. Because of employees' varied work schedules and their own limited administrative resources, directors identified the flexibility of the program and its low cost of operation as two of its most attractive features.

In speculating on the future of the program at B.P.C., all concerned felt that motivation was the most crucial factor. Motivation of trainees to complete the COMP-LAB exercises was obvious: completion is a requirement for continued employment. But motivation among volunteers in the program was much less clear. In comparing those who completed their work on schedule with those who worked sporadically or had disappeared from the volunteer program, we noted that all but one or two of the hard-working enrollees showed a common motivation: becoming eligible for (or redeeming their failure in) the composition course offered at the hospital by Bronx Community College. For those who did not persist, there seemed to be no immediate or tangible rewards for their efforts to improve their on-the-job writing. For some years, chances of promotion based on improved job performance had been remote. In fact, despite pressure from accrediting agencies to improve report writing, supervisors (according to enrollees in the COMP-LAB program) did not seem to notice aides' efforts to produce more correctly written reports. Moreover, we had reason to wonder whether supervisors were generally competent to judge the written quality of these reports. Even the supervisors in the Rehabilitation Center who had expressed strong interest in raising the level of their aides' writing skills were in general disagreement with one another about what constituted a well-written report. Epes invited the nine supervisors in this department to evaluate both the content and written correctness of 26 reports by their therapy aides. Inter-rater reliability scores in both evaluation categories were low (out of 72 scores, only 38 were above .50). It appeared, then, that even among concerned supervisors there was no clear agreement about what constitutes acceptable hospital writing.

The above finding led us to conclude that major improvement in on-the-job writing will not be effected by pressure for it from supervisors, unless they are given training in evaluating writing by writing specialists. Otherwise, the principal motivation must stem from workers' desire to write well for courses they are taking to advance their careers, rather than any immediate rewards for better writing on the job, since they can't rely on their supervisors to recognize improvement.

High Schools

Questionnaires. At the end of each semester in both programs, students completed an attitudinal survey. The responses of students reflected consistently favorable attitudes toward the program and toward the lab component in particular. At both sites, 80 to 90% reported that they enjoyed working by themselves on the grammar modules; and about the same number found the exercises appropriate to their own writing needs. Somewhat fewer (60 to 90%, averaging in the 70s) found the exercises "interesting and fun to do," but they reported overwhelmingly that the exercises were not too difficult. Asked if they perceived an improvement in their writing, most responded affirmatively (in the 80% range). This latter response, however, was not confirmed by our examination of student writings.

Writings. A full-scale evaluation of student essays was not possible, due to data collection mishaps that limited the number of matched essays available. However, student essays from both schools were collected and examined. A sample of 58 essays from August Martin written at the beginning and end of term, and a similar sample of 26 from Charles Evans Hughes, showed little evidence of clear improvement. Essays were written on paired topics (previously used at either the high school or college freshman level) that teachers had felt students would not find difficult. These essays were presented in forced-choice format to an experienced rater of basic writing papers. For August Martin, the rater found the post-test paper superior less than half the time (46%), but also reported finding very little difference between most sets of papers presented to her, and general uncertainty about her choices. For Charles Evans Hughes, the rater identified a greater percentage (66%) of post-test papers as superior, but professed herself no more certain of her judgments.

The equivocal success of the programs in improving student writing should probably not be given too much weight, given the programs' diffuse nature and short duration (one semester). Even if striking improvement had been shown, it would be impossible to attribute it (in the absence of a control group) to the experimental program, let alone to any particular aspect of it. It should be noted that the rater had also been asked to make judgments about different aspects of improved writing quality, where she found it, and was unable to do so. She was left with a strong impression that students wrote better papers "if the topic grabbed them." So the very method of providing carefully matched, relatively impersonal topics for the purpose of obtaining an evaluation sample may have masked real improvement by trying to measure it by performance on an artificial task. Surely students' consistent perceptions of improvement in their performance must mean something, if only

(perhaps) that a basis for future progress had been made.

It appears that the high school programs must be judged an equivocal success, as well, from the point of view of testing the transferability of the college COMP-LAB course. In both schools, a clear focus on writing as the subject of instruction was probably the distinguishing feature of the project for the high school personnel, and this emphasis was undoubtedly successful. But the degree to which the high school courses could replicate the COMP-LAB program had been problematic from the start, as students could work on the lab materials for only an hour or two a week. There seemed to be, too, a tendency for the lab component to dwindle in importance as the programs evolved. Neither of the two cooperating teachers who joined the programs in the second year developed great enthusiasm for the lab component; apparently cooperation in the program added to their instructional burdens, rather than eased them.

Several practical considerations may account for these difficulties in replicating the COMP-LAB course in a high school setting: (1) The experimental program needed a separate lab facility and released time for supervisors, or preferably one full-time supervisor; until special external funding became available, one school didn't have these and the other school could provide them only with difficulty. (2) For this kind of autotutorial work to be effective, students have to be able to do it in substantial quantity. Given the diverse foci of the high school curriculum and the schools' inflexible schedules, it was impossible to meet this need for extensive practice with written forms. (3) Grouping students homogeneously according to writing ability is important for a program focussed on error reduction, but grouping on this dimension was difficult in the high school setting. (4) Effective autotutorial work depends upon the availability of materials which students can actually use (and use up), but in publicly funded high schools this requirement cannot be met.

More serious than these practical considerations were questions raised about the efficacy of the autotutorial approach at the high school level. As noted above, students emphatically liked the idea of self-instruction. Still, examination of their work showed that they were often rushing through the exercises and copying from the answer sheets. Apparently students were not yet mature enough for self-instruction at the level demanded of them by the COMP-LAB approach. Students at the high school level need more frequent feedback--either correction by a teacher or assurance that their answers are satisfactory--than college students do. Furthermore, close correction and monitoring of lab learning in students' other writing assignments could not be instituted at the high school level (as it was at the college level), since it took more time than teachers had, given their higher student load.

In general, these were the questions raised in the course of the evaluation and our responses to them:

1. Are the materials in their present form suitable for younger students? Apparently not. Students have trouble self-correcting their own work and working on their own for sustained periods of time. They need smaller units of work, with more frequent testing and feedback.
2. Do younger students profit from the self-instructional approach? Apparently they do. We discovered that the amount of self-instructional work that these students can accomplish is less than we had expected; that they need far more support and supervision than older students do; but that they find this mode attractive and respond to it very favorably.
3. Was the selection of materials appropriate for students' particular problems? Doubtful. Students reported that the work was indeed helpful for their own particular writing problems, but teachers found themselves giving precedence to instruction in composing, sensing that this was students' greater need. So it seems that while the material was useful, an ideal lab program for the high school level would require major adaptation of the COMP-LAB materials as they now exist. Such a program should probably stress the conventions of writing, rather than grammatical forms.

Other Sites

It was not possible to carry out any formal analysis of change in the writing of learners at the ILGWU local or at the CETA program, for the reasons mentioned in the description of the transfer sites. There is thus no objective check on students' own perceptions that they were learning.

What is most revealing about these two sites is their dependence on the setting. The failure at the union can be attributed to the lack of, on the one hand, an organized educational structure, and on the other hand, any reward for accomplishment. Only the most highly motivated learners could be expected to survive (let alone achieve) in a situation where learning is not facilitated by either a structure or a goal. In contrast, the failure at the manpower site is clearly a result of external circumstances; the program was forced out of existence by the demise of the organization in which it was taking place. There is every reason to believe that the program would have been successful if it had been able to operate as it was designed to.

Summary and Conclusions

In considering the possibility of future adaptations of the COMP-LAB course (or of similar college courses), we need to pay particular attention to these items on the chart in Figure 1: suitability of population, stable setting, and external motivation for both learners and personnel responsible for the project.

These latter conditions were most clearly present at the Bronx hospital site; the adaptation there was most immediately successful, and that is the one site where the program is still functioning. At the high school sites we found that success was limited primarily by the difficulty adolescents have in working on their own, at least to the degree that the college model of the COMP-LAB course demands. Secondary problems in developing high school models were the lack of scheduling flexibility and the limited facilities of the urban public schools chosen for the experiment (and yet chosen advisedly because of the acute writing needs characteristic of their student populations). A substantial revision of the materials and procedures of the COMP-LAB course (a revision which was beyond the scope of this project) and the choice of an urban high school setting with a more experimental approach to instruction might demonstrate that the program (or one adapted from it) could be effective for secondary school students. At the remaining sites, the close fit between learners' needs and learning styles on one hand, and the program's materials and procedures on the other, was not enough to counterbalance the weakness or absence of the other factors listed in Figure 1. However, there seems reason to believe that the program could be as successful at stable, well organized job-training sites as it proved to be at the Bronx Psychiatric Center.

Two major outcomes of our adaptation project are: (1) the establishment of one quite successful adaptation (the Bronx hospital program) which may lead to similar adaptations at other hospitals (the former director of the staff education program at the Bronx hospital is considering such a project in another setting); and (2) insights into how to adapt the COMP-LAB course to many kinds of learners and learning situations--insights which have helped the project directors improve the program as it functions at their home college and at other college sites, and which may be useful in the development of additional models of the course in non-college settings.

One further benefit of this project, although tangential to its immediate goals, should be mentioned. Close observation of varied kinds of learners using the COMP-LAB exercises and

procedures has given us a deeper understanding of the reasons why these methods and materials are effective in teaching the written language, particularly if the learners are nonstandard dialect speakers. These observations have been reported at national and local conferences on composition and language learning (at, for example, the CCCC and NCTE national conventions, at Rutgers University basic writing workshops, at various college-sponsored conferences, etc.). These observations have also led to further research on and refinement of our instructional approach, and have led specifically to a major research project on the effect of spoken language on written language (supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities), an investigation which was conducted by one of the project directors, Mary Epes, principally at the Bronx Psychiatric Center's staff education program, and which included some of the enrollees in the model of the COMP-LAB program developed at that site.