



The Idea of a Writing Laboratory

Neal Lerner EdD

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The Idea of a Writing Laboratory is a book about possibilities, about teaching and learning to write in ways that can transform both teachers and students.

Author Neal Lerner explores higher education's rich history of writing instruction in classrooms, writing centers and science laboratories. By tracing the roots of writing and science educators' recognition that the method of the lab—hands-on student activity—is essential to learning, Lerner offers the hope that the idea of a writing laboratory will be fully realized more than a century after both fields began the experiment.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, writing instructors and science teachers recognized that mass instruction was inadequate for a burgeoning, “non-traditional” student population, and that experimental or laboratory methods could prove to be more effective. Lerner traces the history of writing instruction via laboratory methods and examines its successes and failures through case studies of individual programs and larger reform initiatives. Contrasting the University of Minnesota General College Writing Laboratory with the Dartmouth College Writing Clinic, for example, Lerner offers a cautionary tale of the fine line between experimenting with teaching students to write and “curing” the students of the disease of bad writing.

The history of writing within science education also wends its way through Lerner's engaging work, presenting the pedagogical origins of laboratory methods to offer educators in science in addition to those in writing studies possibilities for long-sought after reform. *The Idea of a Writing Laboratory* compels readers and writers to “don those white coats and safety glasses and discover what works” and asserts that “teaching writing as an experiment in what is possible, as a way of offering meaning-making opportunities for students no matter the subject matter, is an endeavor worth the struggle.”

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