

19 High School-College Collaboration

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In a very perceptive and realistic discussion of the future of writing centers, Jeanne Simpson explains that "the writing center movement has expanded because writing center people have learned to communicate—to form a network, to transmit information, and to exchange assistance" (Simpson 1985, 3). One especially exciting and rapidly growing area for the kind of exchange of which Simpson speaks is that of high school-college collaboration in writing centers. Moreover, those of us who have been fortunate enough to participate in such collaborations can offer one other observation: they are also a lot of fun. Those institutions who are looking to expand or improve their writing centers, indeed their entire writing programs, would do well to consider high school-college collaboration. The need is there; the time is right.

These are rough days for those of us in education, and I'm sure we have all heard the lament before: in the face of declining enrollments and rising academic underpreparedness, of retrenched faculties and budgetary constraints, of sharply shifting federal mandates and weakened public confidence, all levels of the American educational system are experiencing this national crisis. In a study of undergraduate education, Ernest L. Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, discovered "one of our most disturbing findings is the discontinuity that exists between the public schools and institutions of higher learning" (Boyer 1986, 284).

Part of this national crisis, but more pertinent to our purposes here, is the much discussed "writing crisis." From lengthy reports by prestigious national commissions, to hundreds of articles in local newspapers and magazines, the evidence is everywhere and overwhelming. It has become, according to Joyce Steward and Mary Croft, authors of *The Writing Laboratory*, "everywhere the loudest noise in education"

(Steward and Croft 1982, 2). Furthermore, at a time when society is becoming increasingly complex, when more and more underprepared students are being encouraged to attend college, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that many teachers are themselves underprepared in the teaching of composition. Theories of writing process approaches differ greatly from the traditional methods of teaching composition. And as Brannon and Knoblauch note, many student writers have been harmed by teachers who have "exaggerated formal and technical constraints" (Brannon and Knoblauch 1984, 43).

But if both precollege and postsecondary education are indeed in crisis, then for both the way out is clear. Collaborative efforts make the transition more successful for students. It is, clearly, in the mutual interest of both sectors to do so. Because of their concern for the "literacy crisis," the Modern Language Association has established a Commission on Writing and Literature (1983) whose charges include identifying "ways in which MLA and ADE can support the teaching of writing and literature in secondary schools" (MLA 1988, 70). In 1987, the National Writing Center Association, comprised primarily of college members, elected two high school teachers to its executive board and another the following year. They even plan to publish a position statement for high school writing centers.

A significant amount of collaboration is already under way. The Carnegie Foundation itself in 1983 published the first in a series of special reports, Gene Maeroff's *School and College: Partnerships in Education*; in 1985 as part of its series *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, Jossey-Bass published William T. Daly's "College-School Collaboration: Appraising the Major Approaches." The Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, one of the oldest and most successful collaborative programs, has been under way since 1978. Increasingly, federal agencies and private foundations have been funding collaborative projects. The Commission on Writing and Literature reports that "specific collaborative projects (e.g., the National Writing Project) have made significant improvements in the teaching of writing" (MLA 1988, 74). With specific regard to collaboration through writing centers, programs in one form or another have begun in California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Utah, and Wisconsin.

Different in purpose and design though they may be, writing center collaborations are beginning to flourish because, quite simply, they make sense. When an individual school tries to address its own

particular writing crisis, it discovers all too frequently that it is inadequate to the task, not because it lacks the skill or commitment required, but because it lacks the larger perspective from which to examine and evaluate its programs. For example, a high school English department cannot effectively prepare its students for the demands of college writing unless it knows what colleges expect from incoming freshmen. Similarly, a college cannot very well design its program unless it knows how high schools have prepared students. Collaboration between the sectors, then, becomes the means for bridging the gap between high school and college, for ensuring the continuity of excellence throughout the system.

This is not as easily done as it might appear, however. Indeed, to some people the entire notion might seem a bit radical. American institutions of higher education have traditionally had very little to do with secondary education, especially since World War II. So if American education is to improve to the extent now demanded by public and private sectors alike, then collegiality must become the most natural act of all.

It is imperative that college instructors, too long aloof, isolated, and absorbed in the demands of their own disciplines, come to understand and appreciate the concerns and priorities of—and the demands made upon—their colleagues in the secondary schools. College instructors need to ask themselves how realistic they are in their assumptions about high school writing instruction and in their expectations about the writing performance of incoming freshmen. They need to know more about the objectives of high school writing programs, the teaching strategies, the nature of writing activities, and the evaluation practices. Such an understanding will go a long way towards enabling college instructors to deal with the often bewildering array of problems their students seem to arrive with.

Five classes, a homeroom, cafeteria duty, and assorted other obligations leave high school teachers with precious little time for scholarly activities such as research and experimentation. But they have a tremendous amount to offer to the collaborative experience. Hence, it is equally imperative that there be made available to high school teachers a mechanism that can incorporate into current pedagogical theory their experiences, insights, and approaches. That mechanism can be writing center collaboration.

Though now widely appreciated as being of tremendous value to students, writing centers as currently utilized in most schools and

colleges have offered little help to the great number of teachers of composition—at any level—who are in need of improving their own teaching skills. Certainly, like writing itself, the teaching of writing can always improve. And it is here that the writing center becomes even more valuable.

A writing center collaboration can provide teachers with a splendid opportunity to interact with their colleagues and to share experiences, strategies, and insights into the teaching of writing. Such a collaboration offers teachers a freedom and flexibility unavailable in the traditional classroom situation. In the writing center, the opportunity exists to develop and refine diagnostic and conferencing skills, to experiment with new strategies and new techniques, to test the effectiveness of various materials and to develop new ones.

Thus, in addition to bridging the gap between high school and college, a writing center collaboration also bridges the gap between rhetorical theories and classroom activities. The result, beneficial to teachers and students alike, is an on-going and growing community of writers, mutually supportive, mutually instructive.

I mentioned earlier that such a collaboration has an additional benefit: it's fun. These days, not much of what we do in our profession can make that claim. In the discussion of the two very different examples that follows, I am sure that the enthusiasm, the energy, the sheer good will of the participants towards their projects will make this last point readily apparent.

Begun in 1984 and designated an NCTE Center of Excellence in 1986, the Kenmore Project is a splendid example of high school/college collaboration through writing centers.

According to Rosa Bhakuni, Director of the Kenmore High School Writing Lab, the project was initiated by Dr. Harold Foster, Associate Professor of English Education at the University of Akron. As part of the requirements for his course "Instructional Techniques in English," Dr. Foster places each of his Akron students for one hour per week with an experienced English teacher at Kenmore High School. Initial placements were made in English classrooms where the Akron students observed and wrote reaction papers about such matters as teacher technique, student motivation and behavior, and class structure. The extension of the placement to—indeed the eventual establishment of—the Kenmore Writing Lab was a happy consequence of the success of and steadily increasing enrollment in Dr. Foster's class.

Akron students who had no teacher to visit, but who were interested in doing so, were invited to tutor high school students on their writing. At first, this tutoring took place in the back of classrooms, in halls, in

empty classrooms, and in the library. Eventually, through the efforts of Mr. Harry Jordan, the Kenmore principal, a room was secured and the Kenmore Writing Lab was born.

Through their work in the Kenmore lab, the University of Akron students become familiar with the process approach to teaching writing, as well as with one-to-one tutoring and conferencing techniques. Part of their final grade for Dr. Foster's course is determined by several papers written to evaluate their experiences in the writing lab. Ms. Bhakuni notes that "From this group of tutors, one or two are invited to student teach at Kenmore High. . . . and ideally, the student teacher who excels may be asked to join the faculty after graduation."

The Kenmore project is so successful because it truly is a partnership, with significant benefits for all the participants:

1. *The college students:* Because the project ensures their active participation rather than passive observation, they are better trained, more highly qualified future teachers. Furthermore, the Akron students become thoroughly familiar with the realities of teaching as a career; hence, they are better able to judge if it is the career for them.
2. *The Kenmore students:* They receive the benefits of a process-oriented, conference-centered approach to writing instruction. In addition, the element of peer collaboration helps their development as writers and adds to their confidence in its own unique ways. And all of the attention focused on them and their writing reinforces the importance of effective communication.
3. *The Kenmore faculty:* All of the participating teachers understandably appreciate the well-qualified, motivated college students who help them by grading papers, presenting units on literature, and conferencing with the high school writers. Moreover, the teachers benefit from the fact that the college students and their faculty make available the latest in composition research and theory. They are valuable sources of information concerning new strategies and techniques.
4. *The University:* Clearly, such a program benefits the University of Akron by attracting first-rate students to its education department. It provides these students with what Ms. Bhakuni calls "a needed proving ground." And, too, such community involvement makes for wonderful public relations, a benefit not to be underestimated in times of shrinking enrollment and increased competition for good students.

Although not as formally structured as the Kenmore Project—and as yet unfunded—the writing center collaboration between Red Bank Regional High School and Monmouth College, both New Jersey institutions, is a good example of what can be done with a little imagination and a great deal of enthusiasm. It also serves as an example of how years of lack of communication between the sectors can be overcome.

In the spring of 1983, representatives from Monmouth College and several area high schools met to identify common problems and, working collaboratively, to attempt to develop possible solutions. The idea and the energy behind the meeting belonged to Dr. Robert Andreach, former Associate Professor of English at the college, and at that time the Coordinator of Developmental Education. As one of the Monmouth College representatives, I submitted a proposal for a kind of writing center exchange program as one way of dealing with the writing problems we all were facing.

Essentially, what the idea called for was to bring to the college's writing center faculty from area high schools to observe the center's operation firsthand and to share with college writing instructors strategies, experiences and approaches to teaching writing. The project further called for bringing to the college's writing center potential high school peer tutors for training alongside the Monmouth peer tutors, after which they would return to staff their own centers. The directors of the centers would continue to meet regularly, sometimes with tutors, sometimes without, to share things that worked and to discard things that didn't.

The idea, though a good one, was hardly revolutionary. In fact, I later learned that the City University of New York had been involved in a similar project for several years and that another one was under way at the University of South Dakota. Still, it seemed like a pretty good idea to me, one that certainly should be pursued. It also seemed like a good idea to Pamela Farrell, English teacher and Director of the Writing Center at Red Bank Regional High School; so good in fact, that she had thought of it nearly two years earlier and had sent her proposal along to the college.

It is embarrassing but nonetheless important to note that the Department of English at Monmouth College simply ignored her proposal. Whether through arrogance or ignorance or innocence does not really matter. The point is that, in those days, collaboration between the sectors had not yet become fashionable; articulation was not yet

a buzz word. And writing centers were themselves still suspect to some people. This attitude was, I suspect, typical of that at too many colleges. Unfortunately, it may still be at some.

Fortunately, also present at the initial meeting was Dr. Robert Nogueira, the principal of Red Bank Regional High School. He told Pamela Farrell about the rebirth of the idea, and she contacted me during the summer. We began to get to know each other, to discuss writers, writing, and writing centers. Very quickly it became "Pam" and "Hank." We formulated a plan we could both live with and wrote our proposal.

We encountered another significant problem. Our proposal was only one part of a six-proposal/seven-school collaborative package that, though well intentioned, was simply way too unwieldy and unfocused to be taken seriously by any funding agency, either public or private. Quite frankly, Eisenhower's plans for the invasion of Normandy were less complicated than this grant proposal. The responses from several funding agencies were the same: no money.

It was at this point that we decided to ignore bureaucracies and budgets and just try to get something going for the fall of 1984. In the interim, rather than lose touch with each other, we made a point of getting involved in each other's writing activities in any way we could. This turned out to be a wonderful idea.

Pam and I visited each other's writing centers, of course. But we did quite a few other things as well. I accepted an invitation from Pam to attend the Red Bank Regional High School Performing Arts Festival, with which Pam was deeply involved. Many of her creative writers were also prospective peer tutors. In turn, Pam brought some of her creative writing students to a Monmouth College English Department-sponsored reading of works of original fiction by college faculty. We met each other's supervisors and administrators; our students got used to seeing us together. All of this interaction and emphasis on writing, including nonacademic kinds of writing, made collaboration a reality even before we started our tutor training program. When the time did come to start, we knew exactly what we wanted to do and we trusted each other to be able to do it.

Our goal this time was modest, yet it was one that would greatly enrich and improve both of our writing centers. We set out to establish a community of writers, and we wanted our tutors to see their writing centers in just this way. Thus, each center—admittedly serving different populations and with different circumstances and needs—was to be a place where students could come and do some writing, could learn

about writing, and perhaps most important of all could talk about their own writing problems and experiences with an interested, well-trained reader/listener. That reader/listener is the tutor, and learning how and when and what to respond to is what our tutor training program would be all about.

The plan was similar to the original: bring the Red Bank Regional tutors to the college's writing center to train along with the Monmouth College writing tutors. This training would entail writing, role-playing, listening, questioning, observing, information-sharing. Tutors would sit-in on and then participate in actual tutoring sessions being conducted by experienced Monmouth College tutors. Then we would talk some more. Interested faculty from both schools were invited to participate, and through Pam's good offices we were able to have Dr. Nancy Sommers from Rutgers University (now of Harvard University) conduct a final workshop for us on responding to student writing.

During the course of the training, Pam and I were purposefully obvious in our sharing of the workload, the responsibility, and the expertise. We kept saying that collaborative learning was what a writing center was all about. And we felt strongly that if the collaboration between the schools was to work in the way we believed it could, we had to demonstrate it ourselves as well as talk about it.

We were delighted with the way things worked out. Perhaps more important, so were the tutors. They were exposed to a huge amount of information in a short period, and, in fact, had to rethink many of their old views of writing and writing instruction. But they found, too, that the program gave them increased confidence, made them feel quite professional, and was thoroughly enjoyable to boot. Taking their cue from Pam and me, both high school tutors and college tutors found the collaboration to be the most natural thing in the world. They encouraged us to do it again the following year.

Year two of our collaborative project saw a second high school join us. Having heard favorably of the arrangement, Monmouth Regional High School from Tinton Falls, New Jersey, asked to participate and has since become a regular participant. Initially needing assistance in setting up its own writing center, Monmouth Regional is now a full-fledged contributing partner.

To celebrate our third year of collaboration, we decided to go for broke and conclude our four days of tutor training and information sharing with a day-long, statewide conference entitled "Collaboration: Thinking, Writing, Reading." Sponsored by Red Bank Regional High School in cooperation with Monmouth College and the New Jersey Council of Teachers of English, the conference brought to the Mon-

mouth campus over two hundred faculty and administrators from schools and colleges across the state.

David Bartholomae of the University of Pittsburgh and Art Young of Michigan Technological University (now of Clemson University) were the featured speakers. Concurrent workshops led by high school and college experts followed each speaker and addressed such topics as using the humanities as a catalyst for thinking, writing, and reading; teaching Shakespeare to basic readers; and student literacy and the media. The conference also included a book exhibit by Boynton/Cook Publishers and a poetry reading featuring two award-winning New Jersey poets, provided by the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation.

I would like to say that the reason the conference was such a smashing success (and it was) was that Pam and I are such professionals and so expert at such things. We do make a good team, I admit. But the real reason our conference received such a tremendous response and such good reviews was that the need was there, and the time was right. This was the theme we heard time and again both during the conference and in the correspondence we received following it. We were asked to please do it again next year, and I suspect we shall. More important, and ultimately perhaps more lasting, would be for other schools and colleges to begin collaborations of their own. These need not be elaborate, expensive, multi-school arrangements. Simply visiting the writing center of a nearby school or college is enough to start. From there the only limits are energy and imagination.

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