6

Four Collaborative Projects

George D. Wilson

Who put the *labor* in co*labor*ation? Once underway, collaborative projects typically reduce the labor required of any individual. More important, collaboration fosters connections among content areas and among people—connections that might not otherwise be made. Working together cooperatively across subject areas, across school buildings, and even across nations yields great benefits for the teachers and students involved. Writing across the curriculum (WAC) projects are ideal vehicles for collaboration among teachers of different grade levels and content areas. A basic skill necessary to effective learning of any subject, writing must be reinforced throughout the curriculum by all teachers. Collaborative projects that use writing as the common link—the primary mode of communication—strengthen students' writing skills. Moreover, with the English teacher as the principal player in the collaboration, these projects offer a fairly painless way for non-English teachers to use writing in their classes as a learning tool. But how do collaborations begin? Who first envisions the concept? How is that idea shared with others? What obstacles must be overcome? How can administrators foster collaboration among their staffs?

From its genesis to the revelations it finally brings, each collaborative project described here is a story of almost spiritual commitment to the idea that two minds are more than twice as creative as one. Typically, however, one person possesses the vision first and initiates action. He or she cognitively sculpts the vision into a form that others can see, then breathes life into the project by convincing others of its viability. A study of collaborative efforts reveals common themes: a vision, the sharing of the vision, the vision made real, and the outcomes (both planned and serendipitous).

The central impetus for collaboration in the Mt. Lebanon School District in Pittsburgh comes from the members of the junior and senior

high school English staff. Through the efforts of a number of these teachers, collaborations exist with art, social studies, science, foreign language, and home economics staff. In addition, through the use of telecommunications linkages, high school English students collaborate with elementary special education students, with students out of state and in Canada. Writing experiences lie at the base of each of these collaborations, largely because writing is a skill that transcends content-area divisions. In addition, the Mt. Lebanon School District recently completed an intensive, four-year, K–12 WAC program designed to encourage all teachers to use writing as an instructional strategy. The following four examples describe some of the collaborations that occurred over the last two years and typify the interdisciplinary writing projects in the Mt. Lebanon School District.

Visual and Verbal

Working with an art instructor, a junior high school English teacher has her students design greeting cards that are original in their visual and verbal presentation. Students design the image to illustrate their text.

In completing this project the student sees relationships between the written and visual modes of communication, identifies and addresses a specific audience (the recipient of the card), explores and selects appropriate symbols, uses color and design to enhance a feeling or idea, communicates through concise expression, and generally conveys a feeling or idea in a unified visual-verbal format. A team-teaching approach works best with this project.

In describing how she arrived at the idea of creating greeting cards, English teacher Carol Hirsch reveals the ingenuity so vital to successful teachers. As a child she had designed her own Christmas cards to send to family members, but the experience lay dormant in her memory until several years ago. At that time, as Thanksgiving approached, she asked her students to complete a writing assignment: a paragraph about their greatest blessings. Many of the children wrote tender pieces about their parents, and the writing lab clinician (the teacher in charge of the writing lab) remarked that parents would probably appreciate reading their children's sentiments. One student, a few weeks later, curled his piece into a scroll and placed it in his father's Christmas stocking. Carol synthesized these three experiences—her own childhood activity, the clinician's comment, and the student's action—into a single vision. Next, she had to bring the vision to reality, and to do so she enlisted the aid of a colleague. She had talked in the past with an art teacher, Ronald Schreiner, about developing

some kind of interdisciplinary project (for example, having students illustrate their science fiction stories), but they had never acted on it. When Carol approached Ron with her idea, they decided upon the greeting card medium, which would fit well within the art curriculum as well as enhance her English instruction.

With the vision shared and accepted, Carol read in *The Saturday Evening Post Christmas Treasury* (1986) "The First Merry Christmas," an article on the origins of Christmas cards. Using the article as background, she fleshed out the assignment in an organized series of lessons. Students wrote the paragraph assignment about their greatest blessings and used those works as the basis for their cards' texts (to keep it secular, any kind of greeting card was acceptable). Once satisfied with their texts, students began designing the cards. Working with Ron, students used their knowledge of art to make design decisions. When completed, the cards were evaluated jointly by both teachers.

Only one minor impediment hindered Carol and Ron as they pursued their project. Their teaching schedules did not permit the kind of teaming they would have preferred. Ron had to come to Carol's English class while Carol worked with Ron's art students. Most students, however, became so involved in the project that they set aside time after school to meet with the teachers and to work on the cards.

The collaboration resulted in an exciting venture that enhanced students' learning in both English and art. Students enjoyed working with both teachers and having the opportunity for hands-on activity. Their pride in the final products demonstrated the success of the collaboration.

Not only the students, but also the teachers developed new understandings from the project. As an art teacher, Ron saw firsthand how writing could become an integral part of his particular content area. Carol, by modeling for Ron how effectively writing could be used, strengthened the WAC thrust in the junior high school. Furthermore, she grew by the knowledge of her success in making real her visionary project.

Poetry Illustrated

A senior high school English teacher shares with an art class the poems written by her ninth-grade students. The juniors and seniors in the art class create illustrations (pen and ink, watercolor) to enhance the written works. The resulting posters decorate the classroom and hallways, then are photographically reduced and compiled in a booklet. Through this project, art students have their knowledge of poetry reinforced as they interpret poems and design appropriate symbolic or

literal drawings to amplify the written thought. The English students learn how others interpret their work.

Marilyn Bates, a high school English teacher, credits her experience as a fellow in the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project with planting the idea for this collaborative project. She saw that classroom publishing motivates students to value their writing more because others will read it, but she found the publication booklets to be somewhat drab. She asked some students to include pictures with their writings, but found them reluctant to produce the drawings. Driven by the belief that the students would have greater self-esteem and would find their writing even more valued if it had illustrations, she contacted art teacher Mark Pelusi. He saw a natural match between Marilyn's concept and one of his instructional units. Together they decided that her ninth-grade students would write poems that Marilyn would send to Mark's art class. The charge for the art students was to assume the role of publication illustrator—someone who had to design a drawing to accompany a poem. Each art student read through several poems and selected one to illustrate. Their drawing had to reflect their interpretation of the poem. Since the poems were sent anonymously, the art students did not know whose work they were illustrating. When Marilyn's students saw their illustrated works, they discussed at length the interpretation the artist had made and the extent to which it depicted the author's view or presented a different interpretation. When the booklet was compiled and ready for class distribution, Marilyn arranged for a reading complete with wine (sparkling grape juice) and cheese. The students found the experience delightful.

Marilyn points to many positive outcomes of the project. Clearly, the students exhibited greater motivation in their writing and revision. Knowing that their works would be read by audiences other than the teacher inspired them. Many extended their critical judgment skills as they identified their best poems. When they saw the illustrations, students wrestled with the multiple levels of meaning a poem can release as they reflected upon how others interpreted their work. They had a new sense of voice, and they recognized in a unique way the power of metaphor. Perhaps most important, they experienced elevated self-esteem in realizing someone could construct a picture around their poem. In fact, some of the artwork was so elaborate and elegant that the writers felt as though the art bestowed a new worthiness upon the poem. The art students also gained from the experience. Their simulation as illustrators gave them insight into one field of art-related careers. In addition, they used skills in reading, thinking, interpreting, and judging as they probed their impressions of the poems and what drawings would best depict their impressions. They also had an opportunity to demonstrate to an audience outside the art classroom

what they are capable of accomplishing. As Marilyn phrased it, "We compose in many ways, and drawing is a form of composing that represents the student's version of reality. As a writer seeks words to expand on his idea, the artist tries to distill the essence of the poem in a drawing that gives off its own meaning." WAC, or what in this case might be called composing across the curriculum, clearly brings to students new opportunities to learn and to demonstrate that learning.

U.S. History Essay Program

High school English and social studies instructors team teach in social studies classes to prepare students for in-class essay exams administered four times a year in U.S. History. Linking a review of composition structures (an analysis paper and a compare-contrast paper) with specific social studies content, the teachers take students through a simulation of the upcoming essay exam. These "walk-through" experiences provide a refresher for composition skills and for test-taking strategies. English teachers assist in the holistic scoring of the papers, a step that lends credibility to the scoring process as well as provides useful staff development. Social studies teachers reinforce their knowledge of effective writing techniques.

Supervisor of secondary education Dale Cable authored this exemplary WAC program. He recounts a lengthy gestation for the program; its origins date to 1972 when the U.S. History course shifted to a concept-centered approach rather than the traditional one that stressed the memorization of facts and dates. Part of the shift included adopting the inquiry methodology. Dale felt frustration in trying to evaluate accurately students' understandings of higher cognitive concepts using objective tests. In an attempt to understand students' depth of content analysis, Dale began to experiment with essay testing. After using essay testing in his own classes and becoming convinced of its accuracy in evaluating student understanding of content, Dale began to persuade others. Although admitting that essay testing provided valid indicators of student performance, the social studies teachers found the process burdensome and time-consuming. Dale's conviction led him to propose to central-office personnel a reduction in class size for U.S. History classes in order to promote essay testing. Fueling his efforts was a belief that writing instruction had suffered as a result of an English department program shift to an all-elective format. Students, he felt, no longer opted for the challenging composition courses; they preferred to enroll in easier, high-interest literature courses. He used the argument that his proposal would provide compensatory instruction in writing, but that instruction must come from the recognized experts—the English teachers. He enlisted their support. The full proposal—it included

team teaching, reduced class sizes, release time to allow for planning and scoring, and compensation for the English teacher participants—met with skepticism from other administrators and was tabled for several years. Dale continued to advance the idea and built upon the growing writing process movement to lend weight to his position. In 1984 the proposal was adopted, and after several years the program proved so successful that the National Council of Teachers of English endorsed it by recognizing the high school with a Center of Excellence Award.

Extensive review of the program reveals that it achieves the desired outcomes year after year. The English department long ago modified its total-elective program and returned to an emphasis on writing instruction; nevertheless, the U.S. History Essay Test Program continues to demonstrate that a better transfer of writing skills from English to social studies class occurs as a result of the program.

Dale's collaboration began with the single-minded determination to improve social studies instruction by changing the evaluation instruments. After enlisting the aid of English teachers, he finally won approval for the program. His unwavering conviction and ability to persuade others brought a highly effective WAC program into existence.

Telecommunications

Perhaps the most exciting collaborations are those that extend far beyond the school building. In such cases WAC takes on new meaning as the concept includes writing across *other schools'* curricula. Mt. Lebanon is involved in four such projects. First, in an extracurricular project interested high school students use a computer with modem to communicate with fifth graders at one of the district's elementary schools. Second, as an extension of the first effort, students in an eleventh-grade composition class act as writing coaches to sixth graders from another of the district's elementary buildings. Using the modem-equipped computer, the students write to each other and share their supportive criticisms of each other's works. Third, through no-cost, courtesy accounts, students in a composition class telecommunicate with a class in a rural high school in Montana. Fourth, working through Simon Frazer University in British Columbia, Mt. Lebanon's students communicate via computer with high school students in a similarly academically demanding district in Toronto.

Brendan Fitzgerald, a high school English teacher, cites an article by Jeffrey Schwartz (1990) in *English Journal* as the spark for his interest in pursuing collaborations through telecommunications networks. In addition, his motivation grew from his own computer knowledge, his awareness of the allure of technology to motivate

students, his experience in telecommunicating with other educators, and his experience with one E-mail message in particular: from a homebound student in New York who poignantly portrayed his electronic link as virtually his only contact with the world outside his home.

In establishing his first telecommunications venture, Brendan collaborated with an equally enthusiastic special education teacher, Virginia Nikolich, who had recently switched from junior high school to an elementary school. They shared the belief that telecommunications would "break down the isolation of nonmainstreamed classes." Calling it the "One-Room Schoolhouse Project," they structured the activity so that the high school students focused on American Literature course content through attention to poetry, and the elementary students focused on social studies and writing skills, which were a direct part of their curriculum. Important to both teachers was making the experience more than that of just electronic pen pals. After a few "getting-to-know-you" transmissions, the students exchanged interpretations of poems that Brendan and Virginia had selected based upon their accessibility on a variety of levels of interpretation. The teachers allowed the students to interact naturally with little teacher involvement. As the individuals shared their ideas with each other via the computer, the high school students grew in their awareness of communication skills and in their knowledge of working with others. They also gained a more conscious awareness of the reality and validity of different readings of the same text. The elementary students benefited from the extra attention to their writing and ideas. At year's end the collaborating teachers arranged for these students to meet one another by having the elementary students take a field trip to the high school. Never told that the elementary students were from a special education class, the high school students, on meeting the elementary students for the first time, recognized and cherished a unique benefit afforded by telecommunications: to relate to people without regard to individual differences.

For the second project, Brendan worked with Cynthia Biery, a teacher at another elementary building. She had begun an after-school writers' group for interested students. The telecommunications linkage enabled Brendan's eleventh graders to act as writing coaches and to conference with the sixth graders about their works in progress. By writing for a broader audience, the students strengthened their writing skills.

As he became convinced that telecommunications had great potential, Brendan began to explore a wider range of possibilities. Through electronic networks he contacted like-minded teachers across the country. The third project, though still in its infancy, involves Brendan's composition class and eleventh graders from Montana. In the icebreaker stage, both groups recognize the stark contrasts of their settings:

Mt. Lebanon is a large, affluent suburban district whereas its counterpart in Montana is little more than a one-room school whose entire eleventh grade consists of six students. Both groups grow in the knowledge of regional differences and the similarities that all teenagers share. As the project continues and they share their writings, they will have an opportunity to learn more about their respective environments and lifestyles.

A similar project extends beyond our nation's boundaries into Canada. Still in the planning stages, this collaboration will involve a suburban Toronto high school that appears quite similar to Mt. Lebanon in community and school climate. Brendan believes that the students will share many similarities in lifestyle, yet will learn much from their international linkage. These students will be exchanging views on American literature—topics on which the Canadians may hold different perspectives. It promises to be an exciting collaboration and one that offers a new vision of WAC's potential. In addition to what the students will learn through the experience, Brendan and his Canadian counterpart have an opportunity to reassess their respective programs of study, their expectations for students, and their instructional techniques using each other's practices as a model. Most WAC projects focus on a single building's or, at best, a single district's curricula. In creating his interstate and international linkages, Brendan takes the WAC approach to new levels of opportunity.

Challenges for Brendan in all these projects were to obtain the necessary equipment (computers, modem, phone line connections) and to motivate others to join him in investigating meaningful telecommunications experiences. With help from the administrative staff, he received the required equipment, and with his own persuasive enthusiasm, he convinced others to collaborate. His students and the students in these other locations benefit from his and his collaborators' efforts.

Creating a Collaborative Climate

Each of the collaborations described here began with one person's vision. Through personal initiative each visionary brought the idea to a concrete level. Each conveyed the difficulty inherent in implementing new projects—the lack of time to plan, the complications in gathering materials, the need for technical support. In most cases, strong administrative support helped bring the vision to reality.

This history leads to the following questions: How do school districts encourage teacher initiative? Are there steps administrators can take to create a climate conducive to collaborative exploration? What is most needed on the part of administrators is an openness to intrapreneurism. *Intrapreneurs*, according to *The American Heritage*

Dictionary, are people *within* an organization who take personal risks to make new ideas happen. Like their counterparts, those extra-corporate rebels called entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs may be characterized as free spirits. Admittedly, an organization comprised solely of intrapreneurs would be an administrative nightmare—one of their traits, after all, is a low tolerance for bureaucracy. Nevertheless, such people play an important role as innovators and change agents. Administrators who support and promote new initiatives help inspire teachers to become intrapreneurs. In Mt. Lebanon, for example, the administrative and board support for the WAC program fostered enthusiasm among staff members and encouraged teachers to investigate ways to integrate WAC principles in their classrooms. These collaborations stand as testament to that encouragement. In short, administrators who give support to teachers with new ideas and who encourage exploration of new territory will rarely regret those actions.

How do teachers get their ideas? By synthesizing their experiences, by acting on long-held beliefs, by expanding upon ideas from journal articles, and by embracing new opportunities such as the WAC movement and the emerging use of technology. What steps do they take to realize those ideas? The intrapreneurs convince others to join them, and they use that combined energy to make the projects work. Yes, *labor* lies at the root of collaboration, but through cooperation, synergism reduces the effort and brings increased learning opportunities to students.

Notes

For additional information about any of these projects, please contact Dr. George D. Wilson, Director of Secondary Education, Mt. Lebanon School District, 7 Horsman Drive, Pittsburgh, PA 15228.

Acknowledgments: Mrs. Marilyn Bates, Ms. Cynthia Biery, Mr. Dale Cable, Mr. Brendan Fitzgerald, Mrs. Carol Hirsch, Ms. Virginia Nikolich, Mr. Mark Pelusi, and Mr. Ronald Schreiner. These collaborators made the projects described above work. They also collaborated on this publication.

References

Anon. 1986. "The First Merry Christmas." In *Saturday Evening Post Christmas Treasury*. New York: Bonanza Books.

Schwartz, Jeffrey. 1990. "Using an Electronic Network to Play the Scales of Discourse." *English Journal* 79.3: 16–24.