

Linkage Grant for the Improvement of Composition Teaching

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Introduction

In their essay "A National Survey on the Assessment and Improvement of the Academic Skills of Entering Freshman" (*WPA*, 7, 3, Spring, 1984), Lederman, Ribaldo, and Ryzewic state that while "forming productive working partnerships among elementary, secondary, and college teachers is often a Herculean task, such partnerships should result in developing collaborative curricula, assessment instruments, and more effective teaching methodologies" (15). This report describes such a "Herculean task."¹

To get a group of college teachers and high school teachers to sit down in one room together for any length of time, in order to share stories about mutual problems in teaching basic composition, is a very rare event. Yet this is exactly what happened in August of 1983 at Indiana University Northwest, in Gary, Indiana. Funded by the Lilly Endowment Incorporated, and labeled a cooperative project for the improvement of writing skills among high school students, the linkage grant supported ten high school teachers and five college teachers to meet on a regular basis in workshops and classrooms for one year. Because public school writing teachers have tended to view the university as a consulting service, or as a place for continuing education, rather than as a partner in planning writing projects, the relation between college teachers and secondary school teachers has often been that of coach and player, rather than that of professional colleagues sharing similar interests and objectives. It was gratifying to see that more cooperative attitudes developed between teachers involved in this project, and that surprising channels of communications were established for future discussion on writing program administration.

Description

Indiana University Northwest and the Gary School Corporation have had a number of cooperative efforts of the past 15 years, but this was the first where composition teachers would meet and share problems and techniques.² The project director was the Indiana University Northwest

Chairman of Arts and Sciences, consultants were the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and the Chairman of the English Department, and the coordinators of the program itself were the Director of the Indiana University Northwest Guided Studies Writing Program, the Director of Freshman Writing at Indiana University Northwest, the Supervisor of English and Language Arts of the Gary Community School Corporation, and the Gary School Supervisor of Gifted and Talented Programs.

Both high school teachers and college teachers exchanged information on their writing programs, and sought new ways to explore the problem of large numbers of high school graduates needing college remedial writing. During the initial planning sessions for the project, high school officials and college administrators noted the lack of a sequential writing program in Gary from kindergarten to high school. Both also noted that the average secondary school teacher completed less than one semester hour of work in the teaching of composition before beginning their first assignments. Therefore the following objectives were to provide for serious in-service training. Chosen college writing teachers planned and coordinated a two-part program: a) a three-week period of half-day workshops during late summer; b) a two-semester period of formalized collaboration involving 12 two-hour sessions composed of group workshops, team classroom visitations, and cooperative teaching plans.

Program Objectives

1. To increase the opportunity for verbal and written communication between secondary school English teachers and writing instructors at Indiana University Northwest.
2. To share recent research on theories of composition.
3. To review and develop new strategies and techniques to help students write more to the level expected of them in each grade.
4. To help grant participants become practicing writers as a way of maintaining and increasing their dedication as writing teachers, and as a way of improving teaching competence.

The specific responsibilities of the university staff were as follows: a) to provide information on writing requirements for high school students entering Indiana University Northwest; b) to organize and provide leadership for in-service meetings which focused on improving the writing skills of students with average or above average abilities; c) to select new materials and provide innovative programs; d) to conduct in-service training at high school locations. The specific responsibilities of

the high school staff were: a) to share information on high school writing programs; b) to assist with in-service training; c) to evaluate and select new materials and programs.

Designed to spark intense discussion and participation, the program achieved its goal of creating time for free thinking, reading, and experimenting. By attending, for example, lectures on how the child thinks as he writes, by trying out new ways of teaching the paragraph, and by meeting as a group to discuss grading criteria, both high school teachers and college teachers realized how much they had in common. Most of the participants declared that as teachers they were dealing with the same problem, no matter what the age of the student: how to get the student to write a clear and intelligent essay. College teachers discovered that the program helped them bridge a gap in their minds between the kind of writers sitting in their college classrooms after graduating from high school, and the kind of writers who inhabit most of our high schools.

Evaluation

Summative and qualitative data were collected in order to evaluate the project. Pre-writing and post-writing samples, journals, creative writing samples, and assigned essays were collected from students in order to measure progress before, during, and after the program.

Written evaluation forms were requested of all groups. Examples of the kind of information collected are as follows:

- A) Student participants evaluated:
 1. Self growth
 2. Curriculum-as-planned
 3. Curriculum-as-taught
 4. Curriculum-as-learned
 5. Personal writing samples
- B) Instructional staff evaluated:
 1. Performance of each student in detail
 2. Curriculum-as-planned
 3. Curriculum-as-taught
 4. Curriculum-as-learned
 5. Improvement in written work
- C) Supervisors evaluated:
 1. Overall effectiveness of total program
 2. Objectives and outcomes realized
 3. Curriculum-as-designed
 4. Curriculum-as-implemented

The "Questionnaire for Teachers," developed by the CCCC Committee on Teaching and its Evaluation in Composition (see the May 1982 issue of *College Composition and Communication*), was administered twice to both high school and college teachers: once at the beginning of the project, and once at the end. The questionnaire helped both groups discover mutual assumptions, problems, and surprising similarities about the teaching of writing.

Secondary school participants were asked to give reports on the instructional units they had designed for the project. The effectiveness of each unit was assessed by both groups of teachers in discussion sessions and reports were written to the project director.

To assess changes in student writing, holistic ratings of student writing samples from secondary school classes were undertaken. The criterion was that established during the summer workshop by all the participants: those cognitive and writing skills judged necessary for success in college. Long and heated discussions over criteria to be used eventually lead to an agreement between high school teachers and college instructors as to what writing standards are required for certain grade levels. Many participants noted, for example, that having a clear main idea or thesis statement was more important than having perfect spelling. Others noted that both high school and college teachers were concerned about how well students developed their ideas with concrete examples. Everyone agreed, however, that the essential skill necessary for success in college is the one which can clearly state an issue, and then use evidence to support it. All secondary teachers agreed that knowledge of grading criteria used by college instructors of composition would help them be more effective teachers.

One more tool of evaluation was used. In order to explore certain personal attitudes which both grant participants and students had about their writing, the Daly and Miller Writing Anxiety Scale was administered twice to both groups before and after the project. Anxiety about writing was found to be prevalent among teachers and students alike.

Results

The "Questionnaire for Teachers" failed to reveal any significant differences between what high school teachers expect in good writing, and what college teachers expect. Both groups discovered that organization, clarity of thought, paragraph structure, sentence variety, verb tense, and punctuation were their concerns. However, college teachers placed more emphasis on content than did high school teachers, and they expected more originality and creativity in student writing than did their

secondary colleagues. The discovery of these kinds of similarities and differences, discussed openly by all, remains the major strength of a linkage program. Such information has impact not only on the formation of high school curricula by secondary administrators, but also on what college instructors may emphasize in their classrooms. Writing program administrators contemplating such a linkage program may want to begin their meeting using this questionnaire.

The "Writing Anxiety Scale" showed that high school teachers were more anxious about their writing skills, and about the act of writing itself, than were college teachers. Statements which initiated the most writing apprehension were: "I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in writing"; "discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience"; and "I don't think I write as well as most other people." These three statements not only characterize the worries students have about their writing, but they also characterize what most teachers of writing in our project felt about their writing. All of us admitted in our discussions with one another that we were hard on ourselves when it came to believing that we were good writers. Clearly, an experience such as this can benefit both high school and college teachers, especially since all of us discovered that our anxiety about writing was not as alienating as we thought it to be. Post-test scores from the "Anxiety Scale" did show a slight reduction in our level of anxiety.³

Overall reactions on the part of school administrators and teachers to the linkage program were positive. Communication between university writing teachers and area high school writing teachers came to be seen as much more important and productive than administrators had realized. By discovering similar problems in the teaching and administering of writing programs, college and high school teachers no longer felt isolated from one another as professionals. College writing program administrators should note that in planning such a linkage program for their own schools, emphasis should be placed on ways to encourage and use the camaraderie which will naturally develop between high school and college teachers. Since popular conceptions about intellectual "barriers" and wide curriculum differences between secondary schools and universities were broken down, fruitful workshops and class visitations were possible. As one college teacher put it: "Whether or not I would have consciously recognized it, I was thinking of this as missionary work—not necessarily pleasant, but necessary. The linkage program hasn't been like that. I have received more sense of renewal of purpose and more specific, helpful teaching techniques than anywhere else in my fourteen years of teaching. The high school teachers are giving much to me."

Weaknesses in the program revolved around appropriate follow-up. Feeling pressured to meet the administrative demands of curriculum deadlines, high school teachers who implemented new techniques learned from workshop discussions did not have enough time to adequately test the results of their experiments. Follow-up discussions were held, but samples of student writing performed before and after the implementation of experimental units were found to be unreliable. Secondary school administrators who want to plan linkage programs with their area universities may want to insure that adequate methods for reliable follow-up are defined and distributed before the program begins, and that room for teachers to explore new ways of teaching writing be built into the curriculum.

To close with a few remarks by both high school and college teachers is, I think, appropriate. The following descriptions were submitted on evaluation forms at the end of the project.

"One of my college team members and I," said one high school teacher, "are going to continue collaborating on a research project investigating the composing process of ninth graders with the hope of publishing our results."

"I plan to continue to use sentence combining exercises in all of my English classes, as well as pre-writing exercises, which I have learned about from the linkage program," said another high school teacher.

Said one college instructor: "Perhaps my strongest impression of high school teaching, after the Lilly Linkage Grant, is of its difficulty, of the physical and psychological demands it places on the teachers."

And finally, one of the high school teachers who had visited a college composition class and had asked the students what they would tell teachers and students in their high schools about writing, related this message from the students:

"Take it more seriously. Make us do a lot more of it. It's a real pain to take a remedial class after you get to college." These messages, she said, "carried back to our schools, are the heart of what linkage programs are all about."

Notes

¹The Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute has had an ongoing collaborative project between university faculty and New Haven high school teachers since 1978; for a full account see *Teaching in America: The Common Ground* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1985).

²"Project SEED" was a mathematics program for elementary school children funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF). The "CLASS Program" (Collegiate Level Advancement in Secondary School) had Indiana University Northwest offer credit courses in local high schools for gifted students. The "Health Science Summer Project" helped minority high school students of high ability plan to pursue health careers.

³Here are the results of the "anxiety" profile for my two groups of high school students: a) pre-test showed 94% anxiety for grades 9 + 12. b) Post-test showed only 35% of 9th graders were anxious about writing, but it showed that 75% of 12th graders remained anxious. Research is needed to find out if writing anxiety plays a role in poor writing entrance tests for incoming freshmen.

Appendix: Resources Used by Linkage Grant Participants

Donovan, T. R., and McClelland, B. W. *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition* (NCTE, 1980).

Cooper, C. R., and Odell, C. *Evaluating Writing* (NCTE, 1977).

———. *Research on Composing: Points of Departure* (NCTE, 1978)

Lindemann, Erika. *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982).

Perrin, Robert. "With Reason and Less Pain: Preparing High School Students for Freshman Composition." *College English*, 44 No. 4 (1982), 405-412.

"Evaluating Instruction in Writing: Approaches and Instruments." *College Composition and Communication*, XXXIII (May, 1982), 213-229.

