

Dancing on the Interface: Leadership and the Politics of Collaboration

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Although writing teachers and program administrators share the goals of helping students improve their writing, develop strategies for inquiry, and learn to navigate in academic life, their agendas are far from identical. Where the role of teacher demands a pragmatic stance focused on getting the present group of students where they need to be during the present term, the role of administrator mandates a longer perspective, a focus on helping numbers of teachers and students approach their goals with increasing effectiveness over a number of terms. Administrators who intend to lead dynamic programs in which new ideas are investigated, challenged, implemented, and changed need to recognize that central difference and find ways to exploit it rather than resist it.

Teachers live in a world of daily classroom demands. They tend to see their work in terms of getting it done effectively and to be unimpressed with theory unless it can be shown to improve practice. They sometimes view themselves as caught, the only ones who truly understand the complexity of their task: hemmed in on the right by the simplistic beliefs of students who wish to be taught only what they need to know to become certified and thus inevitably affluent, of parents and university administrators, colleagues in other disciplines and neighbors down the street who all know that writing well is simply a matter of getting the point across and the punctuation right. And on the left, the airy claims of theorists who are, or often seem to be, out of touch with reality or operating in a privileged context which the teacher cannot hope to share. People in such a situation are justly cautious about theory, whose effect as often as not is to complicate their lives and inject new jargon while providing little if any help with the daily struggle.

A teacher of writing myself, I share those concerns. I, too, want to work in a program which frees my time and energy for the activities I believe will help my students perform well. But looking back over my growth as a teacher, I judge that my ideas, buffeted by the winds of theory, are much more cogent now, better focused on the realities of practice, than they were when I began. A major factor in that process of change has been a series of program directors dancing, more or less nimbly, along the interface of theory and practice, meeting the teachers on the ground of their own concerns but inescapably leading the program

toward a future whose shape they could only partially foresee. My own tenure as program director provides a case through which to explore the role of administrator as catalyst of continuing change in a context where the professional development of staff is as important as the instruction of students.

Early in 1987 the basic writing program at the University of Louisville set out to develop a portfolio evaluation procedure to replace an exit examination. As director, I proposed the change, but it could not actually have been accomplished if the staff had not agreed that it was an idea whose time had come. Teachers that we are, we saw this as a pragmatic move, one that would solve some problems for us. Since the program's beginnings in 1976, we have through strenuous application evolved from a "Writing Clinic," a place where students ill-prepared for freshman composition were given supplementary tutoring, into a basic writing program that succeeds fairly well in preparing such students before they go into those courses. Of the 416 students enrolled in English 099, Basic Writing, in the fall of 1985, 236 had passed English 101, the first half of the college-level composition sequence, by the end of fall 1986 and 117 had passed 102. Eighty of the original 416 were still enrolled in either 101 or 102 in spring 1987 (Hudson). We have accomplished our success by turning our faces resolutely away from atomistic, "drill for skill" approaches and toward whole discourse, pressing our students both to read and to write texts of increasing length and complexity, and asking ourselves every day what the students need to be able to do and how we can best help them learn to do it.

The composition and organization of our staff have made this evolutionary process possible. When the program began, people were hired to tutor at an hourly rate for no more than twenty hours per week. This arrangement attracted a few graduate students, a few part-time instructors already involved with freshman composition, and a few escaped housewives. Our collective opinion in the early years was that we were inventing basic writing, as indeed we were. No one in the "real" university knew how to help the unskilled writers being admitted to the freshman class. This perception (myth, you might call it), that our basement band of hourly workers was charged with some of the university's most difficult and necessary work, shaped our polity. Mostly women, educated but not specialists, we learned to share what we knew and what we didn't know, fusing our directors' theoretical knowledge with our daily experience in a growing body of collective understanding about our students and our work.

Over the years, personnel and the program itself changed. Graduate students finished their degrees and moved on. Part-timers found other positions or other lines of work, and escaped housewives took up

graduate study. New part-timers, always plentiful in an urban labor market oversupplied with degreed women, brought new ideas. The program was changed as well by pressures from without. The graduate program's growing interest in "the Clinic" as a unique teaching experience brought us more graduate students wanting to apply their theory and research their questions. When budget cuts coincided with growth in student population, classes replaced tutoring groups, and our budding theorists helped us learn new ways to teach. As the 80s wore on, the enthusiasm of the open admissions era gave way to sober talk about accountability, and many of us came to regard ourselves as fit to claim professional knowledge and move into larger arenas.¹ But the underlying myth persisted; the basic writing staff still conceives itself as a collective, a "we" of able individuals pursuing common goals.

Several factors made portfolio evaluation seem like a reasonable next step in the development process. The institutional politics that always surround open admissions and "remedial/developmental" instruction had framed the program in a test-in, test-out mode very early in its life, and the exit examination, an in-class essay written during finals week, had come to be seen by some faculty and administrators as a form of certification, a kind of guarantee that we were minding the gate, not letting just anyone run loose in the college-level programs. But from our point of view, basic writing was simply one of several offerings in the freshman composition sequence. It seemed contradictory to spend the term teaching our students to invent and revise, to read aloud and collaborate with their peers, to seek help when they had trouble and to take the time to let an essay ferment and grow, and then to make an impromptu, individual, unrevised, in-class essay the final test of their proficiency. If we found that troubling, our students found it outrageous. The contradiction was apparent to them, and they saw that the exit exam devalued their entire semester's work.

Not only did the in-class essay, which we performed at midterm as well as finals so everyone could see how everyone was doing, test the wrong skills in our students, but it took too much of our time and energy and bent it in the wrong direction. We spent far too much time devising assignments for midterm and final: topics everyone could have a decent shot at, instructions everyone could interpret, preparation everyone could manage, enough security that no one should feel cheated. We valued our tradition of reading midterms and finals together, holistically, so that each instructor had the benefit of two other readers' evaluations of her students' work. But to read 485 impromptu or lightly revised essays on a single topic in a single afternoon was not a pleasing prospect even to the most fervent collectivists among us.

My superiors agreed to our replacing the exit exam with a portfolio if we could be sure that it would provide as effective a gate as the exam

seemed to have been. Certainly, gatekeeping was a concern we shared. The difference was one of emphasis: they sought to protect the integrity of programs by excluding the ill-prepared. We wished to protect our carefully nurtured students from premature assignment to courses beyond their proficiency. Thinking it over, we saw that we already had in place most of the elements a good program of portfolio evaluation would require. We had always maintained folders of students' work throughout the semester, to which we sometimes referred when the exit exam's result was too ambiguous. Although there were individual differences in how things got done in the classrooms, the program's unifying philosophy assured that all the students were producing, ultimately, the same general kinds of work—whole discourses in which the writer sought to make some sense of experience and information through writing. And we were accustomed to gathering as a staff to discuss and negotiate questions of quality in the finished products.

The decision to switch was made, then, mainly on pedagogic and pragmatic grounds. We thought it would send more useful messages to our students to evaluate several pieces of their truly finished work on topics of their own choosing. We believed we could spend our energy and time more productively deciding how to evaluate these diverse works than on devising a uniform topic twice each semester and evaluating rough drafts of responses. And we were satisfied that portfolios would offer us more accurate views of how well the students could write and how well they could be expected to perform in other composition courses.

From my perspective, however, the decision was not altogether pragmatic. I saw it partly as an opportunity to extend the cooperative style of operation which had become the trademark of the staff. Believing that our collaboration as a staff, the constant tension between personal responsibility and responsibility to the group, was the key to our program's growth in sophistication, I thought to use portfolio evaluation, as Belanoff and Elbow suggested in their 1986 WPA article, to enhance the sense of collaboration and community among teachers and to extend the developing use of collaboration among students.

Given that well-developed cooperative style, my task as director was to stage the implementation, to establish procedures and enable the necessary negotiations about criteria of judgment. I began by shaping our semester's staff meetings to move us, just ahead of the students, from concept to realization.

In early January we discussed our purposes and tried to develop an overview of the process of changing, estimating what new demands the project would place on us. We wrote a new statement on grading for the

students which informed them of the change to portfolios and explained the evaluation procedure in general terms:

Instead of writing a final exam, at the end of the semester you will turn in a folder containing three pieces of revised writing which you and your instructor agree represent your best work. Two instructors other than your own will read this work and decide whether it passes. If they do not agree, a third reader will decide. If the readers give your folder a passing mark, your instructor will give you a final grade of A, B, or C, based on her or his evaluation of your whole semester's work. If your folder receives a failing mark, you will receive a grade of F for the course, regardless of the rest of your grades.

In English 098, "pass" means the readers believe the writer is proficient enough to begin work in English 099.

In English 099, "pass" means the readers believe the writer is proficient enough to begin work in English 101.

There will be a preliminary evaluation in March. Readers will evaluate one piece of your work at that time, so you can see what we are looking for. March evaluations are purely for your information and will not count in your final grade.

As we composed, we saw that our major tasks would be to define acceptable pieces of writing for submission, and to define "passing" in the absence of a single assignment to which all writers were responding. I proposed three categories of essays I thought would specify an appropriate range for our basic writing students:

- a) a personal essay that makes a point,
- b) an essay drawing on an outside source of experience—other people, systematic observation, response to a written text—which reflects on the source and makes a point,
- c) a piece of writing done entirely in the classroom.

We agreed that those categories described the general area and that we could safely leave their specifications open for awhile. Finally, I organized working groups of three or four members and asked them to make arrangements to meet periodically throughout the semester. I suggested that the specification of categories would be a good topic for the groups to consider at an early meeting.

In February, we examined a small group of sample essays provided by instructors. I selected for this meeting five essays which I thought would raise interesting questions about writing quality and asked each instructor to bring one additional essay from his or her class. My preparatory notes for that meeting say, "We need to take an analytic approach to the idea of 'passing' where the final products will be diverse. Too early today to speak in terms of pass/fail. Try to evaluate these samples in terms of better/worse and articulate reasoning." Borrowing some workshop

techniques from Peter Elbow, I first asked the whole staff to respond to each of the samples in several ways:

- 1) Read and record, using simple marks such as X to indicate positive and negative moments in your reading.
- 2) Describe this essay as "objectively" as you can, going paragraph by paragraph, or chunk by chunk. Eschew evaluative terms. What does the writer do? Then what?
- 3) What do you like most about this essay?
- 4) What do you like least?

We talked our way through a few responses this way, trying to encourage "readerly" responses and hold off the "teacherly" impulse to judge right away, and then I asked them to complete the reading independently and finally to rank the five essays. I knew I could depend on them to fall into small-group discussions as they worked, which would raise some issues people might be reluctant to bring up in the larger group.

We came back together to discuss the rank orderings. This conversation illuminated some areas of disagreement, such as how much generalizing framework an essay needs. Is it rightly an essay if it's "just a narrative," even when the point of the narrative is clear? Or is the offended reader just clinging to a narrow idea of essay because the writing was done by a student? We did not try to settle those questions beyond arriving at a rough consensus as to which essays were better than which. Finally, each working group met to hammer out a single rank ordering which merged the five common samples with the previously undiscussed sample essays from their classes. I asked for a group report which would include a copy of each essay and a brief explanation of the group's reasoning in arriving at the merged ranking. What factors, I asked, does your group find most salient in evaluating these essays?

These reports revealed strong agreement around several values, and one important problem we would have to solve. All the groups, not surprisingly, indicated that a clear focus or point, coherent support for it, a reasonable level of readability and a sense that the ideas were significant to the writer were desirable attributes. Jeanne Laubscher, writing for her group, summed up their concerns:

The piece had to clearly establish an assertion in some way and continue in an organized (overtly or subtly) way. The support, whatever it was, needed to be relevant and more than pedantically mundane. Details had to be essential, not extraneous. Overall, cohesion and coherence were important. Some of us liked pieces which built to a climax, had a turning point. Some liked arguments organized by strength. We felt the abstract should serve the concrete, and vice versa.

It was good for us, however frustrating, to have to rank apples and oranges together. It brought up questions, particularly of the relative worth of narrative. Some of us were inclined to be prejudiced towards tobacco stripping [one of the sample essays] just because it was a story, though we ultimately concluded that it uses that mode to skillfully make a powerful point. However, as BW instructors, we're a bit narrative-shy; we'd like to see what else she can do.

This brings us to risk-taking. We liked risk-taking, either in mode or subject matter chosen. Of course, the risk-taking had to turn out reasonably well. No one was excited about giving C-1 [another sample, about the writer's "First Date"] a fairly high ranking. Such a piece, however well executed, is utterly incapable of tickling the mind. Mentally, humanly, there is no "deep structure." Perhaps we go into these papers with a kind of hunger; we want something that can touch us, satisfy us.

The problem that emerged was about the inevitable diversity of the essays, about degree of difficulty, following instructions, and the relation of intention to achievement. How, some instructors asked, are we to evaluate in the absence of the assignment? Is it not important in evaluating to know whether the student has followed instructions? I had deliberately conducted the meeting without reference to the assignments the writers were working with, believing it necessary to wean ourselves from reliance on the printed instructions in evaluating student writing. We don't, I reasoned, evaluate professional writing, or our own, against a sheet spelling out ahead of time its shape and size. We think about what it's meant to do, and evaluate how well it does that—inform, or tickle, or explore. I wanted us to pull away from the legalistic tendency to appeal to the terms of the assignment and say "This fails because the writer only gives one example and the assignment says several." Furthermore, I calculated that it would be entirely too slow and cumbersome at semester's end to deal with a different combination of assignments in each folder. Better, I thought, to develop a way of dealing with the naked writing than to try to re-orient to each new assignment. But as several staff members pointed out, what a student writer has attempted is often a compelling factor in evaluating what he has accomplished, and the instructor's assignment may be the clearest way to find that out.

In March, when we would ordinarily have read midterms, we met instead to evaluate one essay of each student's choosing, reading them all first in working groups and then as a whole staff. This would be a crucial meeting, at which we would see whether we would evaluate confidently without the comforting uniform assignment to guide our decisions. I had prepared a "Provisional Scoring Guide" in which I attempted, on the basis of the reports from February's meeting, roughly to codify our expectations.

Provisional Scoring Guide

Midterm Evaluation

1. High pass

Writer expresses and supports a point to which he or she seems genuinely committed. All supporting evidence is plainly relevant, and the essay is arranged in paragraphs whose logic is evident. Sentences are clear and in some cases pleasingly constructed. Mechanical error is minor and does not impede reading.

2. Pass

Writer expresses and supports a point but may not show much commitment to it. Supporting evidence is generally relevant and paragraphing seems logical. Sentences are clear and their boundaries are almost always correctly punctuated. Mechanical error may appear, but is incidental rather than pervasive.

3. Barely Fail

Writer attempts to express a point, but may fail to support it successfully. Evidence may be inadequately developed, or poorly organized so its relation to the main idea is unclear. Paragraphs may not be consistently marked, but some organizational units are detectable. Sentences are generally clear, but boundary marking may be inconsistent. Mechanical error may interfere with easy reading.

4. Abjectly Fail

Writer makes no point, or expresses it so poorly that the reader is unsure what the point is. Relation of evidence to main idea is hard to establish. Paragraphing may be absent, or its logic altogether mysterious. Although some sentences are clear, others may be broken or tangled, and boundary marking is inconsistent. Mechanical error impedes reading.

The working groups first discussed the scoring guide, using it to establish agreement and illuminate areas where ambiguity and disagreement were probably inevitable. Then they evaluated the work of each other's students, referring to the assignments at will and discussing whatever problems and questions arose. After a break, we gathered in a single group and read all the essays again, this time outside the responsible instructor's working group and without reference to the assignments. Following that meeting, I again asked for written feedback, primarily to induce participants to articulate their responses and examine them. From observing the readings and discussions, I was satisfied that reading without the assignments would be best. I was convinced that the readers were more flexible, more responsive to the writer's intention, when they read outside the confines of the teacher's assignment, and that seemed compellingly the best way to assess the writers' proficiency as potential students in freshman composition. The response sheets revealed that about half the staff still disagreed with me but that several were in the process of rethinking. They also provided a place to begin on the two matters that our final preparatory meeting would need to address definitively: the specifications of acceptable work for the portfolio, and the related question of how much help students could legitimately get and how they should report it.

In April we settled questions about procedures and the assignment and drafted a memorandum to the student body, telling them in more detail what we expected and what they could expect from us. We decided that we were not much concerned about students "cheating" because the process of drafting and guided revision going on in the classes was keeping each instructor well aware of each student's work. That decision made the rest of our work easy. We did not need to see an essay written entirely in class to be sure that we were evaluating each student's own, true work. The first two categories could stand as written, and any other essay the student had written for this class could be submitted as the third item. And we decided we could use a cover sheet similar to the ones Elbow and Belanoff suggest to solve the rest of our problems:

We need to know three things about each piece of work. Attach to each essay a sheet that tells

- a) what you were trying to accomplish in that essay,
- b) what sources of information or evidence outside your personal experience you used in writing it,
- c) who helped you with it, and what kind of help it was. Use this space to acknowledge advice, comments, questions, and suggestions from your instructor, other students, tutors, friends, family members, or anyone you got help from.

Finally, in the first week of May, we evaluated the completed portfolios, again working first in small groups where negotiation was fruitful, and then as a whole staff. Each instructor's folders were evaluated by other members of the working group while criteria were argued once more. In a second meeting all staff members met and read folders from classes of instructors outside their own working groups. Although we had expected reading folders of three items each to take a long time, the process was surprisingly quick. The number of third readings required to resolve disagreements was smaller than it had been at midterm, and after it was all over, I had to adjudicate only one irreconcilable case. That compared quite favorably with the seventeen I had had to deal with in December, after the last final essay grading.

The rates of passing and failing, the matters in which our superiors were sure to be interested, were about as usual: our percentage of students passing was a little higher than usual for spring semester, but not the highest ever, not even high enough to generate a request for explanation. Evaluation forms from instructors indicated they found the new procedure more accurate and more informative than the old one. On reviewing the marks given their students' folders, they found them about as they had expected. They agreed that the portfolio provided a more complete picture of students' writing proficiency and suggested that the slight increase in the rate of passing might be accounted for by students whose ability to generate and organize was good, but whose mechanical skills were shaky. Several students whose work on an impromptu essay would have looked questionable to us were able to demonstrate satisfactory competence when a wider range of their work, in a more finished condition, was evaluated. Particularly important, they said, was that the final evaluation sessions were much less onerous than those in which hundreds of impromptu attempts at the same essay were read. It was pleasurable to read what our students had been able to accomplish, and the more finished drafts treating a variety of topics were easier to read respectfully, as real writing instead of practice pieces.

Evaluating our first experiment with portfolio evaluation, we called it a success and began planning how to do it better next term. And this is the outcome in which I, as an administrator, am particularly interested because it portends the program's future shape. Our pragmatic decision to adopt a different style of evaluation initiated a new process of change in our teaching community, one which I think will, over the coming semesters, significantly change our relations to our students, to each other, and to the larger world of composition teaching and theory.

Social constructionist epistemology, newly ascendant in the field of composition, lends respectability to the notion of communities working together to shape their ideas. Its practical counterpart, collaborative

learning, is about the hottest thing going in teaching these days. The culture has begun to realize that the myth of the solitary individual, sweating out works of genius in a lonely garret, is just that, a myth. Researchers are learning that much of the writing done in American workplaces is not the product of individual effort but of collaborating teams with problems to solve. In our own workplace, we have been practicing collaboration for years, all the while thinking ourselves somewhat aberrant, collaborators by necessity because we lacked individual knowledge.

But it has become clear in my mind that we have been doing it in furtherance of a pedagogy that partakes far too much of what Paolo Freire calls the "banking" concept of education, in which the teacher transmits knowledge to essentially passive students. My observations of classes over the last two years suggest that although a number of instructors use collaborative and workshop techniques on some occasions, the classes have remained, to a disturbing degree, teacher-centered, with the instructors doing most of the talking, providing most of the ideas, controlling most of the action. In using the move to portfolio evaluation as an opportunity to extend our collaboration, I hoped also to use it to turn our pedagogy in a more meaningful collaborative direction.

I wanted to do that, not because a body of objective research proves that to be the best way to teach students to write, but because I am convinced, by my reading, my own experience, and my notions of proper human relations—my politics—that learning to generate knowledge in cooperation with one's peers is what higher education is and should be all about. I think, that is, that educated people should be responsible for their knowledge, aware of where it comes from and capable of shaping it. But collaborative activities in the classroom can only work toward that goal if the teacher, the person responsible for shaping the course, is aware of it as a goal and is willing to surrender some authority. Students can learn to think and write with authority and commitment only if they genuinely possess some authority in the major areas of their lives. And they are not likely to develop such authority in a teacher-centered classroom where all transactions are founded on the principle that one knows (the truth, the correct way, the rule) and the other does not. Such a classroom is fundamentally authoritarian, and no amount of good intention and kindness can change that fact.

Collaboration, by diminishing the role of the "overhead" authority, requires participants to take more personal responsibility for what they do, think, and create. Thus the whole notion of collaboration among students, teachers, writers, workers, is revolutionary in this culture. It requires people to surrender the illusion of individual autonomy and the flag of "correctness" that such autonomy sails under, and seriously negotiate terms, ideas, concepts. In our case, the concept under negotiation was "quality of writing." In our months-long process of negotiation,

we collaborated differently than we had in the past as I endeavored to shape the collaboration to a larger end than orderly transition to a new system of evaluation.

I do not intend to sound superior here, or manipulative. On the contrary, I wanted to shape this opportunity to work with my colleagues in a genuine, conceptual collaboration because I believe that only by reshaping authority relations as instructors experience them can I convince them to reshape their own authority relations with their students so the students begin to hold the responsibility. I tried to relinquish the authority to shape the assignment, write the scoring guide, pick out the anchor papers for each category, and decide all the difficult cases. Like students in a classroom, they were not always pleased when I answered questions with more questions, summarized their conflicting responses without validating one or the other, walked away from hot arguments. But they were the ones who had to decide what was adequate and what was not in the context of what they were teaching. It was their responsibility, finally, to shape a definition of writing quality that they could talk to students and each other about. And of course they succeeded.

I suspect that, to some degree, I succeeded too. In the final evaluation forms, and in conversations around the coffee pot, I hear intimations, hints, and a few outright declarations that future classes will be shaped more definitively around collaboration. For one thing, observes the instructor, selecting and preparing that many final drafts for a distant and critical audience is too much work for one person to supervise. Students, she says, will just have to help each other get ready. Like my predecessors, I will be long gone from this place before any of this comes to fruition. I leave content to know that, as well as orchestrating a practical advance in evaluation, I have been instrumental in turning the program a little more away from the individualistic and toward the collaborative.

Note

¹Readers who are interested in a fuller exposition of this process and how it reflects the world of composition teaching are referred to Hephzibah Roskelly, et. al., "Survival of the Fittest: Ten Years in a Basic Writing Program," in the *Journal of Basic Writing* (Spring, 1988).

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