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Promising Connections: Uniting Writing Teachers

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- *Research in writing program administration at the elementary, secondary, and university levels, with discussions of changes in standards and assessment, approaches to mentoring and evaluation of teachers, curriculum mapping, selection of courses, syllabi construction.*
- *Inquiry into the how we prepare writing teachers to reach out beyond school walls, specifically studies of writing instruction that includes engagement with academic service learning, community writing, learning centers, extracurricular writing projects, writing competitions or programs, and publishing of student writing.*

Our expectation for *The Journal of Writing Teacher Education* is that publication will offer teachers of writing at all levels a space in which to explore commonalities, to compare strategies, and to evaluate existing policies and common practices - - in effect, making connections across institutional and departmental divides. Though obstacles may exist, we believe that the construction of an academic space such as this one will provide necessary opportunities for shares interests, efforts, and hopes.

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Promising Connections: Uniting Writing Teachers

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Two thousand eleven was a banner year for the Composition Studies-English Education Connections SIG, a special interest group that meets annually at CCCC. First of all, the SIG marked its ten-year anniversary. From 2001-11, the SIG showcased more than one hundred presentations by an impressive range of new and veteran teachers-scholars who, despite differing roles and affiliations, all share a professional interest in mentoring new writing teachers in the broadest sense of that responsibility. Second, former and current SIG co-chairs published "Seeking Connections, Articulating Commonalities: English Education, Composition Studies, and Writing Teacher Education" (Alsup, Brockman, Bush, and Letcher) in *College Composition and Communication*. The article, which chronicles the SIG's ten-year history, appears in a two-issue symposium celebrating the tremendous value in significant NCTE-CCCC bridges. As if these two overlapping events—the ten-year anniversary and subsequent recognition from the CCC article—weren't enough, SIG leadership also learned in 2011 that Jonathan Bush, a founding SIG co-chair, had proposed and received approval to create a new journal, *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education* to be published by Scholarworks/Eerkeley Electronic Press. Though not formally affiliated with the Composition Studies-English Education SIG, the journal's roots are intricately connected to it and, further, SIG members are likely to be targeted as readers and contributors—more good news.

As current and future SIG co-chairs, we naturally see value in *Teaching/Writing*, so we immediately invited the co-editors to the 2012 SIG meeting in St. Louis, where they will introduce the journal, distribute PDFs of the preliminary issue, and discuss the Call for Manuscripts for the inaugural issue, along with general submission guidelines, publication schedules, and the like. In turn, we readily accepted the co-editors' invitation to explain in this preliminary issue of *Teaching/Writing* why the field needs the journal and what we hope it might provide to its readers and the field, at large.

Take Inspiration from the SIG

As previously indicated, *Teaching/Writing* is not currently affiliated with the SIG (or any other professional association, for that matter), but the SIG nevertheless does help to demonstrate the tremendous audience the journal will immediately address.

Identifying and Reaching the Interests of a Broad and Far-Reaching Audience

Most obviously, SIG members, whose ranks number in the dozens, are representative of a far larger group of writing/rhetoric professionals who easily number in the thousands: writing program administrators (directors of composition and basic writing coordinators, as well as NWP site, WAC/WID program, and writing center directors); English education faculty (writing and/or literature methods professors, field instructors, and student teaching supervisors); and secondary-level English teachers (NWP teacher-consultants, host teachers, literacy coaches, and classroom teachers). These three major groups, as well as their corresponding subgroups, represent an incredibly broad range whose pedagogical influence is made even stronger by virtue of varied geographic location and institutional affiliation. They teach, for example, in rural, small town, urban, and suburban locations across the entire country and in virtually every educational setting imaginable (flagship institutions,

regional universities, private and community colleges, and in secondary-level arenas).

One could argue that this vast group already contributes and subscribes to a number of excellent journals with fine publishing records, so why create one more? While there are many journals for which writing teacher education is part of a larger intellectual concern (*English Journal*, *Voices in the Middle*, *Writing Center Journal*, *Business Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Basic Writing*, *College Composition and Communication*, and *Pedagogy* to name just a few) none of these journals currently focuses specifically and solely on the topic of mentoring new writing teachers. *Teaching/Writing*, then, has a more fine-grained mission than the other pedagogical journals do, but even that fine-grained focus, however, is more complex, multi-layered, and nuanced than one might suppose. In the SIG sessions over the past ten years, for example, three overlapping topics—identity construction, practical teaching suggestions, and an overall focus on growth, change, and innovation—have emerged as especially rich and noteworthy among presenters.

We expect that these themes would be further explored in *Teaching/Writing* articles, but we challenge the co-editors to go beyond them. For example, the journal might delve further into the intricacies of writing assessment, contexts for writing instruction, methods for instruction of particular genres, practical rhetorical theory, professional issues for writing teachers, new state standards for teaching writing, and many more issues, which other key journals in the field may touch on in only specific articles or special issues.

Creating College-to-Secondary and Discipline-to-Discipline Connections in Hostile Learning/Teaching Climates
Anyone reading the newspaper or following the politics of education reform knows it's a particularly vulnerable time for best practices in the teaching of writing, particularly in secondary schools. Teachers are demonized daily in the media and by candidates seeking higher political office. Thanks to the Obama administration's new federal funding practices, an inarguably successful and long-standing program for the teaching of writing, the National Writing Project, must now compete for funding with far less tested and more politically motivated programs. And, thanks to the offensively entitled "Race to the Top" fund-structure, states must compete with each other for revenue to educate the nation's children. In New York State, the governor's recently issued budget may follow suit, requiring school districts to compete as well. It's no accident that it's increasingly difficult for professional educators to connect in an atmosphere of increased competition.

Another complicating factor for writing teachers is the Common Core State Standards, which were created with minimal input from educators by a consortium of US governors and appointed state commissioners of education and which have now been adopted by almost every state in the union. For good reasons, the CCSS have neither been endorsed nor opposed by the National Council of Teachers of English, but they have the potential to reshape writing education in K-12 schools. Even more concerning is the fact that new assessments for the CCSS are scheduled for release in 2014, but we so far do not know what those assessments will look like. Much about literacy is not easily assessable, but the public (including political and media leaders) seems dangerously unaware of this. Further, "preliminary documents indicate that. . . computers may be involved in both administration and scoring" of these assessments (Wessling 6). It's too early to cry foul, but it's unlikely that computer scoring will raise the level of writing expected on standardized exams. Computers aren't known for nuance.

The encouragement by pundits and politicians of public anger against schools and teachers coupled with the increased inertia of too-easily-measured standardized exam writing does not bode well for the future of K-12 writing instruction. As a result, it is an important time for instructors of writing at all levels to work together to maintain best practices in the teaching of writing and to build them in an increasingly hostile climate. Needing to build connections between college and secondary schools, however, does not mean it will be any easier.

Institutional, cultural, and intellectual boundaries separating most secondary and college writing teachers are multiple and mighty. High school and middle school teachers' increasing class loads and sizes make it difficult for them to find any time at all for connections. College writing teachers—particularly those who don't teach in colleges of education—receive little reward for making connections with secondary schools, and, frankly, it's much easier to stay on one's own campus. Much heralded reports of studies indicating that teachers earning of masters degrees has no impact on students' tests scores are unlikely to increase college-secondary connections. Those of us who work in the borderlands of writing instruction (English Educators) understand the pressures faced by both groups of colleagues and we see the possibilities that can grow from collaborations between them. We lament that there are not more ways to connect.

Even NCTE's journals highlight separations between levels: *English Journal* (primarily for secondary English), *Voices from the Middle*, *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*. And the handful of NCTE members who regularly attend both the NCTE Annual Convention and the Conference on College Composition and Communication note the stark cultural differences between them. The Composition Studies-English Education Connections SIG has helped strengthen the resolve of those of us in the borderland. The new journal, *Teaching/Writing*, will help even more by creating a space in which a central purpose is mentoring teachers at all levels in well-informed practice in the teaching of writing. Its online venue is likely to improve communication even further, not just communication between levels of instruction, but also between writing teachers in different disciplines.

The new journal, Teaching/Writing, will help even more by creating a space in which a central purpose is mentoring teachers at all levels in well-informed practice in the teaching of writing.

Since Richard Gebhardt's foundational 1977 CCC article "Balancing Theory and Practice in the Training of Writing Teachers," the field has documented (see, among others, Fox and Fleischer; Tremmel; and Tremmel and Broz) that teachers and scholars who might be potential readers for *Teaching/Writing* are likely to work in disciplinary silos separated either physically or symbolically by institutional boundaries, turf wars, or disciplinary borders, making discourse and dialogue difficult or even impossible.

When institutional silos do not allow for disciplinary cross talk, events such as the SIG provide time and space for them to happen. When people from two similar, yet sometimes competing, disciplines share a room and speak in real time, stereotypes and preconceptions break down, experiences are shared, and scholarly identities are expanded. (Alsop, Brockman, Bush, and Letcher 677)

Though *Teaching/Writing* provides opportunities for merely text-based conversations, as opposed to the SIG's face-to-face interactions and exchanges, the online venue renders the journal more accessible for readers. Most obviously, it negates fees and/or other expenses associated with journal subscriptions, association memberships, or conference attendance, and it allows any reader—regardless of content or developmental level, institutional or departmental affiliation, and/or geographic location—to gain easy access to the journal and be connected to the community at whatever time or day is convenient for the reader. And readers who still prefer traditional, print materials will appreciate that the *Teaching/Writing* format is a PDF file with the "look and feel" of a visually appealing, standard print journal—another great feature responsive to the broad range of readers, including their digital comfort level.

On the topic of digital comfort, it's worth noting that the online venue is also responsive to this diverse group in another way; it provides tremendous flexibility in terms of production schedule. Currently, the schedule is

a single, annual issue with four or five articles and a book review to be published in October of every year—a reasonable goal, one that saves the co-editors from the need to “rustle the bushes” for suitable manuscripts during the first two to three crucial years as the journal gets up and running. However, *Teaching/Writing* will surely increase the momentum of the professional dialogue among and between the subgroups, so we predict the co-editors will eventually see the need to increase production to two or even three issues a year, as number and quality of manuscript submissions warrant it. This transition, though, will take place smoothly and with virtually no additional publishing expenses, thanks to an online venue.

Take Inspiration from Other Journals

In addition to serving as current and future SIG co-chairs, this article’s co-authors each serves as an editor for a national journal (Ken is the current editor of *English Journal*; Elizabeth, an assistant editor for *Pedagogy*, is responsible for a column called “From the Classroom”). Naturally, the audiences and missions of *English Journal* and *Pedagogy* vary from that of *Teaching/Writing*; nevertheless, both journals have a national audience and a pedagogical focus, and we believe that this new journal can take inspiration and learn lessons from these well-established venues.

Pedagogy: Lessons from Another New Journal with Similar Roots and Cross Sub-Disciplinary Perspectives

Now in its twelfth year and recipient of the 2001 Best New Journal Award, *Pedagogy* came into being in much the same way that *Teaching/Writing* did: A grassroots effort.

We became convinced of the need for a journal [like *Pedagogy*] during our last years in graduate school: as teaching assistants, we found that the profession paid little attention to issues of teaching; subsequently, as teacher trainers ourselves, we had little information to provide to the new TAs in our program. Circumstances over the past five years have suggested that the profession is hungry for pedagogical discussions. The annual Modern Language Association convention has seen a steady rise in sessions on teaching; the MLA Approaches to Teaching series has produced many new volumes in recent years; and *PMLA*, *College English*, and *Profession* have devoted special issues to teaching. Certainly, *Pedagogy* owes a debt of gratitude to these and other journals that have steadily brought the importance of teaching into view in their subfields. Yet in a profession in which a large portion of our scholarly work concerns itself with teaching, it is ironic that no single journal is exclusively devoted or consistently committed to exploring that work across the discipline and from a range of perspectives. (Holberg and Taylor 1-2)

Like Jonathan Bush, *Pedagogy* co-editors Jen Holberg and Marcy Taylor saw a need in the field, they believed the time was right, and they secured both the financial backing and editorial support required to begin a new journal. Equally important and most relevant here, the journal was originally, and is still to this day, committed to publishing the scholarly and creative endeavors of both new and veteran scholars across all the English Studies sub-disciplines.

Taking inspiration from *Pedagogy*, we propose that the *Teaching/Writing* co-editors remain true to its mission and do the same. After all and as previously emphasized, writing teacher educators represent an incredibly broad cross section in English Studies, but let’s be truthful: English Education professors and WPAs may likely perceive themselves (or be perceived by others) as the primary target group for *Teaching/Writing*, just as *Pedagogy* was frequently mistaken initially as “just a comp journal” (Holberg and Taylor 1). Indeed, the SIG, with its English Education/Composition Studies cohort, reinforces this reality. To remain true to the *Teaching/Writing* mission of encompassing all the sub-disciplines who mentor new writing teachers, then, the co-editors should most obviously actively solicit and/or accept manuscripts from scholars outside of English Education and traditional Composition Studies, as important as these two groups are. However, they could, perhaps less

obviously, consider the book review section planned as a regularly featured column by examining it through a *Pedagogy* roundtable lens.

To clarify, we remind the co-editors of Jonathan Bush’s round table review of Katie Wood Ray’s *The Writing Workshop: Working through the Hard Parts (and They’re All Hard Parts)*, which was published in *Pedagogy* in 2005. Entitled “Finding Connections, Seeking Reciprocity: Toward an Inclusive Community of Writing Teachers—Kindergarten to College and Beyond,” the review is a discussion across disciplines and developmental levels that brought together Doug Baker (an English Education professor and NWP director), Jane Morrison (a WPA), Patricia Bills (an elementary teacher), and Tom Moriarty (a rhetoric and writing scholar).

At first glance, the work of elementary teachers and that of college composition scholars has little in common. The case for making connections between high school and college writing has been made, but what does writing in elementary school have to do with college composition? It might be considered a stretch [our emphasis] The group’s task was to see if the [Wood Ray] text, though written for one developmental context [elementary and middle school], would have meaning for the others as well, and, if it did, provide a model for the type of collaboration that could actually occur across developmental levels. . . . Could all the cross talk result in real disciplinary change and improved K-16 writing instruction? (Alsup, Brockman, Bush, and Letcher 21)

This roundtable may initially appear to reinforce the centrality of English Education and Composition Studies, which we have explicitly challenged the co-editors not to assume; but think again. The elementary teacher complicates the roundtable roster. After all, she reports teaching writing in a “small, urban center . . . ser[ving] the most economically challenged families in the area [a]t time of . . . statewide budget cuts, a growing transient population, and dwindling enrollments (Bills 345), and so it’s her unique perspective—neither that of an English Educator or Composition Studies specialist—that provides “the stretch” that enlivens the conversation and, thereby, enriches the knowledge and awareness of all the panel members and, by extension, *Pedagogy* readers. While it’s unlikely that the *Teaching/Writing* co-editors will precisely replicate the roundtable review format found in *Pedagogy*, we challenge them to provide book review and other writing opportunities with multi-voiced perspectives that create unlikely bedfellows, such as professional writing faculty and NWP teacher-consultants, student teachers and WAC/WID directors, or writing center directors and host teachers—the kinds of writing teacher mentors and mentees who aren’t likely to otherwise physically or virtually meet for the purpose of exchanging ideas, enriching each other’s professional lives, and for the overall purpose of “improve[ing] K-[College] writing instruction” (Alsup et. al. 21).

English Journal: Lessons from 100 Years of Serving the Cause

NCTE’s oldest and most widely-read journal, *English Journal*, just celebrated its 100th year of publication with the January 2012 issue. While EJ was originally conceived as a journal for all teachers of English, as NCTE grew and sub-groups formed and founded their own journals, *English Journal* has become the official journal of NCTE’s Secondary Section. Since its inception, *English Journal* has taken the teaching of writing as a major focus; in fact, its now-famous first article, published in 1912 and written by Edwin M. Hopkins, has an eerily-contemporary sounding title: “Can Good Composition Instruction Be Done Under Present Conditions?” (His answer comes in the first sentence: “No.”) As its current editor, Ken describes the *EJ* audience as “grade 6-12 English teachers and those who love them” (i.e., English Educators). The teaching of writing is a frequent focus for articles and issue themes, and two regular columns have focused on writing instruction: “Innovative Writing Instruction,” edited by Valerie Kinlock and “Professional Writing Instruction,” edited by Jonathan Bush and Leah Zuidema.

One of Ken's goals as editor has been to increase the number of articles that demonstrate and encourage secondary-college collaboration. Notable collaborations that focus on writing instruction include Brockman et. al. "Helping Students Cross the Threshold: Implications from a University Writing Assessment," and Fanetti et. al. "Closing the Gap on High School and College Writing Expectations." He also instituted a feature called "EJ in Focus," in which a noted scholar would be invited to write a sustained article on the issue's theme. Over the past several years, Duane Roen, Nancy Mack, Doug Hesse, Bonnie Sunstein, Patricia A. Dunn, Jim Burke, Grant Wiggins, Heather Bruce and many others have written "EJ in Focus" articles that examine best practices in the teaching of writing in the context of the issue's theme. Arthur N. Applebee and Judith Langer have reported results of their National Study of Writing in English Journal, most recently in July 2011. Also, in collaboration with the CEE Commission on Writing Teacher Education, Ken is working on creating a special EJ award for the best article written in collaboration between secondary and college teachers.

Despite EJ's contributions to writing teacher education, the format of the journal does not allow it to completely cover what even just the discipline of English needs to support teachers of writing, particularly new teachers. EJ's audience is very busy and has great need for a particularly practical focus for its articles. As a result, English Journal articles are generally no longer than 15 manuscript pages (often quite a bit shorter), and while they are well-informed by theoretical concepts, they do not often include sustained attention to them. EJ also focuses on all of English language arts (not just writing), and judging by the submissions and responses we get, the average reader is more excited about teaching literature than teaching writing.

Teaching/Writing, then, creates a more exclusive focus on well-informed writing instruction, which will allow greater diversity of disciplinary attention to writing, to genres of writing that may or may not be central (right now) to secondary classes (even if they should be), to professional issues for new and veteran teachers of writing, and for writing about writing instruction. In addition, the online format will allow for a greater diversity of lengths of articles and would be easily accessible for teachers at all levels. Done well, the journal has the potential to reach a very wide audience with a very wide range of experiences and needs—all centered on developing effective writing instruction.

Improving Writing Instruction: Taking Students' Texts Seriously

What we see as this new journal's greatest potential is that it will contribute directly and widely to improved writing instruction. *Teaching/Writing* will unite those of us who take students' texts and their composition seriously enough to appreciate in-depth, sustained focus on the subject. Moreover, we believe *T/W* has the potential to "reverse the long-standing marginalization of teaching and the scholarship produced around it and ... to assert the centrality of teaching of our work as scholars and professionals" (Holberg and Taylor 1). We are, however, most likely to reverse this trend by forging connections among professionals interested in teaching real—not just easily assessable—writing expertise even at a time when such connections are discouraged by so many cultural, institutional, and political boundaries.

Our field's older journals, the College Composition-English Education Connections special interest group, and now, *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education*, are not only spaces in which successful collaboration can happen, but they are also hallmarks of the successes that are possible with determination and optimism.

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