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Teaching/Writing Together: Joining Stories, Joining Voices

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In our narratives of higher education within universities we rely too often on a K-12 foil: College professors correct the shortcomings students bring with them from their previous schooling; we offer a depth which offsets the one-dimensional views students learn in high school; we make students work and think with more sophistication and precision. Typically these narratives feature – whether prominently or buried under faint praise – primary and secondary teachers failing to prepare students college. These stories focus particularly on literacy shortcomings, on students who can't write or aren't prepared for complex and challenging readings, hand-wringing that puts special pressure on faculty in composition and rhetoric and English education. College writing classes “fix” writers, breaking them from their schooled habits; English education classes prepare teachers who can do it better. These generalities are not fair to many in both fields, of course, but teachers at all levels will recognize this familiar narrative arc. We hope to challenge and replace these stories with new ones highlighting collegiality and collaboration, mutual understanding and celebration, shared struggle and support, narratives written and revised as writing teachers at all levels reflect on their experiences and share their scholarship in the pages of this journal.

We should start, perhaps, by remembering what we have in common, which is, most crucially, our teaching. We rely on knowledge and experience and our own intuition to create the best learning conditions we are able to. We take pleasure when students exceed their own expectations, when they succeed in new tasks. We care about language and composition and we believe in the possibilities of our own work, both in the lives of our students and in the future of a democratic society. These are starting points for us, fundamental aspects of our profession. Likewise, we share institutional and political affinities. Teachers at K-12 schools have long experienced the harrowing admixture of decreasing budgets and increasing oversight. They are used to political (mis)representations of teachers that emphasize unprepared students and undisciplined teachers (or unprepared teachers and undisciplined students) and that further undermine their increasingly unacknowledged professional status. Creative and progressive K-12 teachers grapple daily with official mandates from all levels – from district policy to Common Core standards – that seek to define more and more narrowly what teachers do in their classrooms. If college faculty are paying attention, we shouldn't be surprised to see evidence of these trends in our own daily work, a “trickling-up” as post-secondary institutions commit further to data-driven program development and assessment. Literacy scholars need to recognize the work our k-12 colleagues have done in negotiating these pressures. Under such conditions none of us, especially those teaching in public institutions, can afford to make our communities smaller. This journal should help us capitalize on those commonalities.

At the center of such a praiseworthy project, however, is a thorny rhetorical challenge. Professional expectations for college faculty prioritize research that addresses disciplinary questions and contributions, academics writing for academics. K-12 teacher-leaders, however, rely on research, practice, and policy to help other teachers improve their instruction, expert teachers addressing other teachers. Navigating these vastly different rhetorical situations requires acts of translation on the one hand and acts of professional empathy on the other, and this navigating will never be done successfully unless it is done in collaboration. In order to make their work

available and relevant to teacher-leaders, literacy scholars must listen carefully to the lived experiences and fundamental questions and challenges posed by k-12 teachers, which requires embracing the expertise those teachers have in delivering rigorous and differentiated writing instruction and in negotiating the pedagogical, administrative, and public expectations that shape their daily work. We share a similar professional organization in the National Council of Teachers of English, but the journals and conferences sponsored by NCTE too easily divide into audiences of scholars and audiences of teachers. This journal offers a professional compass, a navigational aid that can emphasize cross-institutional listening and learning, promoting grassroots scholarship that helps teachers become better teachers at the same time that it advances the disciplines of composition and English education.

Rhetorically, then, this journal appears to be entering uncharted territory. So one of its primary tasks will simply be practical: how can we write for and with one another? How can we identify the shared concerns and practices that will sustain connections across grade levels and institutions? These boundaries are often articulated but are not real. We hope to demolish them. When we review and reflect on the work we do, it suggests that we are looking in different directions and that we are working on different projects—we're not. We are all teaching writing. A broader lens on our shared work and our shared challenges gives us a clearer voice and reminds us that we are all of us professionals who can teach and learn from one another. English education and Rhetoric and Composition discussions are crucial in breaking down boundaries, connecting with K-12 writing teachers, and articulating common strengths and concerns that span K-16 challenges to effective writing instruction. The National Writing Project has secured alliances across grade levels and into the University and has helped form something like a common cause among teachers of writing, wherever they work. Those of us with the opportunity to teach English education courses in our universities cannot afford any attitude of condescension regarding the critical work our students have committed to. And of course we have, or ought to have, sophisticated theoretical understandings about literacy and pedagogy that should foster connections between any thoughtful teachers – which is to say most of them – focused on increasing the literate ability of their students.

This journal offers opportunities to explore connections, interrogate barriers, and focus on ways we can all contribute to report research and projects that bring like-minded people together to solve the looming problems associated with literacy and learning.

This journal makes its debut at a time when all literacy educators, from pre-kindergarten to graduate school, must come together and provide a clear voice in influencing national, state, and local educational policy; celebrating the scholarship unique to English Education and Composition and Rhetoric as separate, but related, fields, yet working together in articulating and pursuing common goals in literacy education. This venue offers opportunities for reframing repressive literacy policy conversations, a space for critical questioning, and fresh examination and analysis of current trends in curricular standardization and assessment by researchers and teacher-leaders committed to improving writing instruction at all levels. This journal offers opportunities to explore connections, interrogate barriers, and focus on ways we can all contribute to report research and projects that bring like-minded people together to solve the looming problems associated with literacy and learning. We're writing teachers, of course. We love challenging our students to confront new and often for them unimagined rhetorical situations. We love seeing them stretch and stumble and revise and gain a voice. We especially love when their writing teaches them, and us, something they had never understood before they sat down to write. This journal asks the same of us. And we know the best way to figure that out is to start writing.