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About the Author

Christine Tulley is an Associate Professor of English and Director of Writing in the Department of English at The University of Findlay. She is the founder of the new MA in Rhetoric and Writing beginning Fall 2013 at The University of Findlay Her work has appeared in *Pedagogy*, *Computers and Composition*, *Enculturation*, and *JAC* and she is co-editor of *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice* (Hampton Press, 2008). Her research interests include writing teacher education and connections between classical and digital rhetoric.



All Hands on Deck: Bringing Together High School Teachers and Adjunct Instructors for Professional Development in the Teaching of Writing

Jennifer S. Cook and Becky L. Caouette
Rhode Island College

For the past eight years, Jenn has worked at Rhode Island College (RIC), as a joint appointment in the English and Educational Studies Departments as an English teacher educator and as a First Year Writing (FYW) instructor. She is also the Director of the Rhode Island Writing Project (RIWP), Rhode Island's only affiliate of the National Writing Project. For the past three years, Becky has worked as the Director of Writing, an administrative challenge for anyone but surely even more of a challenge for a new professor just out of a doctoral program. We are among the small group of "new hires" in our department and are among an even smaller group of faculty who have devoted our careers—both in research and practice—to the teaching of writing. Out of a shared passion for writing and the teaching of writing, and out of what we might call a necessity for collaboration, we began to talk about how our programs—the College's First Year Writing Program and the RI Writing Project—might support each other. After all, just as Becky is constantly challenged by the daunting task of building community, developing practice, and maintaining a cohesive program when between 80-90% of her instructors are adjunct faculty, Jenn is feeling continuously challenged as the director of an organization that has lost its federal funding and that is seeking ways to bolster its affiliation with the host institution. We are each in charge of writing programs on the RIC campus, and in an effort to grow our programs and to collaborate, we created and co-facilitated the first ever "One-Day Summer Invitational Institute for Adjunct Faculty of First Year Writing at Rhode Island College" in June 2012. Nine Rhode Island College adjuncts participated in the day, as did three high school English teachers and the two of us, college English professors.

This is our story, a story that we are presenting here as a vision of what is possible if we start to act collaboratively across the traditional academic silos that keep us separate from one another, isolated in our practice, and unaware of what has come before (or what comes after) our instruction of the students in front of us. This article is not intended to be prescriptive or reductive, as it is primarily a report of how we collaborated to address a specific and yet generalizable problem across college campuses and writing project sites: an absence of non-evaluative forums, spaces, and opportunities for adjunct faculty and secondary teachers to come together to talk about the teaching of writing. We have chosen to begin by presenting the contexts in which we each find ourselves as well as the various historical and institutional factors that affect our work. This background information may be familiar to some, especially our National Writing Project readers, but we provide it here so that you can see how our work is connected both in substance and status.

The Rhode Island Writing Project (RIWP)

For nearly 40 years, the National Writing Project (NWP) has grown an incredible network of classroom teachers and researchers and has provided hundreds of thousands of hours of professional development. Under Jim Gray's model, professional development for teachers was turned on its head when the NWP was founded in 1976. Where there once were highly-paid consultants delivering lectures to teachers on assigned readings, now there would be classroom teachers, steeped in their own expertise and knowledge, sharing with their colleagues their practice and methods. At the heart of this model is a deep respect for and honoring of teachers' experiences, their wisdom, and their relationships with their students. Also at the heart of this model is the idea of partnership: university researchers and professors working side-by-side with K-12 classroom teachers, a collaboration that Jim Gray was smart enough to see would have the greatest potential for transformation (of students, of schools, of selves):

By the late 1970s, the idea of the writing project seemed to be catching on. Faculty members at colleges and universities throughout the country understood that if significant educational change was to take place, schools and universities would need to form partnerships based on respect for each other's knowledge. (59)

Bringing people together from across a great divide has indeed, in these 38 years, lessened the gap between the ivory tower and the K-12 classroom. And, yet, the historical, deep-seated tensions between "education" and "liberal arts," between "scholars" and "teachers," are still there, the chasm still wide, working to divide folks instead of bringing them together, even in this new era of networks, collaboration, and open access. The Rhode Island Writing Project has been located on the RIC campus for 27 years where, most notably, RIWP teacher consultants played an instrumental role in helping the RI Department of Education (RIDE) develop Rhode Island's first statewide writing assessment. But, that was nearly twenty years ago, and in the time since then, the relationship between the RIWP, the RIC campus and administrators, and RIDE has been strained for various reasons that the scope and length of this article

do not allow us to explore in detail.

When Jenn became Director of the RIWP in 2010, after several years as a Co-Director, it was clear to her that she would need to set a course for extending the RIWP's reach on campus and in the state. So, at the RIWP, we were ready and willing to participate in any new initiatives related to writing on our campus. One of the initiatives that Jenn continued, one which was begun by her predecessors, was holding a Writing Marathon on the RIC campus in celebration of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)-sponsored National Day on Writing in October, something that Becky had participated in the prior year. And, in one of her first developments as Director of Writing, Becky teamed up with the RIWP to work on coordinating the Writing Marathon and celebration of the National Day on Writing with an entire Writing Week at RIC, complete with guest speakers and writing-related events. Suffice it to say that the National Day on Writing—and Writing Week at RIC—was the catalyst for this collaboration. It was an auspicious beginning.

At the same time that we were beginning to develop a collaborative relationship as colleagues, all federal funding for the National Writing Project was drying up, due the loss of earmarks in Department of Education bills in the U.S. Congress. No longer could we depend on a \$47,000 site grant arriving each year to support our work. No longer could our College count on collecting at least 10% of that grant and adding it to the long list of grant awards secured by faculty members. The loss of funding, in a sense, caused our “rating” to drop on campus, like a plummeting stock, and it was up to Jenn, and her Executive Board and Co-Directors, to steer the ship to a place where we could breathe easily again. Some Writing Project sites have closed because of this loss of funding, so the threat of survival-of-the-fittest was, and is, real. This “survival mode” that we have been thrown into has caused the Rhode Island Writing Project to reexamine our purpose and visibility on the Rhode Island College campus. Our survival depends on making ourselves relevant not only in the context of K-12 writing instruction in Rhode Island but also in the context of what is happening on our college campus. How do we make ourselves viable and relevant—with our WP knowledge of teacher development and sound pedagogy—on our college campus? How do we make ourselves indispensable to our College?

In the 2011-2012 academic year, the RIWP had a Leadership Retreat to identify, among our Executive Board and Fellows, what our focus should be as we move forward. We needed to limit ourselves to three to five “Big Picture” ideas/visions, as we also need to keep in mind our limited human capacity and our desire for sustainable programs and systems. One idea that emerged from the WP Leadership Retreat was to strengthen our connections to Rhode Island College. But, we first had to identify the need on our campus. Where does our campus NEED the Writing Project? What could the Rhode Island Writing Project do, capitalizing on our strengths, to make ourselves useful to our college campus? In particular, how could we make ourselves useful to the School of Arts & Sciences and the English Department, our academic home?

The First Year Writing (FYW) Program

When Becky was hired in August 2009, her job description included the Writing Program Administration (WPA) duties of Director of Writing which, for all intents and purposes, primarily meant overseeing one of the English Dept's General Education offerings to the college: “WRTG 100, Writing and Rhetoric.” This four-credit course was, at the time of Becky's hire, the only required writing course for the undergraduate community (individual schools or programs might require other courses, but WRTG 100 was the single universal writing requirement on campus). While the General Education Program at RIC is undergoing changes as we write (see below), WRTG 100 continues to be one of the few courses, if not the only course, that all undergraduate students are required to successfully complete or account for (i.e., the requirement is waived because of transfer credit or early college/dual enrollment credit). RIC offers, on average, between 50 and 60 sections of this course per academic year.

The Director of Writing previous to Becky had overseen both the RIWP and the English Department's General Education offering in writing. With the split in duties and Jenn's assumption of the Directorship of RIWP in 2010, upon hire Becky was able to focus her efforts on organizing and developing the writing course offerings into a coherent, recognized program within the college. Beginning steps included branding—she created the cohesive unit called the “First Year Writing Program,” complete with web presence, logo, and an annual report. She also requested a modest yearly budget and answered the college's call for regular assessment of the program. Right now, the FYW Program is in the midst of piloting several new initiatives, including Directed Self-Placement and a new six-credit FYW course, “WRTG 100Plus.”

The biggest challenge to date that Becky has faced, however, is the staffing of FYW sections and providing professional development opportunities to instructors. As our statistics make clear, the overwhelming majority of FYW courses are taught by adjunct instructors—instructors who are paid per credit hour, who receive no benefits, who have no job security, and who only recently unionized. While the Modern Language Association (MLA) and NCTE, for example, each have statements on the status and treatment of contingent faculty in higher education, real change is slow to come to institutions like RIC for a variety of reasons (not the least of which is, of course, financial—fair, ethical compensation for qualified, experienced instructors is costly). Thus, in spring 2012, the FYW Program reached a new low since Becky's arrival on campus: 90% of the sections in the Program were taught by adjunct instructors. Of the 20 sections of Basic Writing and WRTG 100 being offered, only two were taught by tenure-track faculty (one of whom was Becky; Jenn was on sabbatical, though she is usually one of the full-time faculty teaching WRTG 100); of the fifteen instructors teaching in the FYW Program, only two (about 13.33%) were tenure-track (again, Becky was one of them).

Before we continue, it's important to note here that we are critical of the working conditions of the FYW Program and not

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of the instructors who work within the program. As the success of our Institute makes clear, we are fortunate to work with some excellent writing instructors—people who are dedicated to the teaching of writing and to the students in the classrooms of RIC. Rather, we lament the consequences of their contingent positions. We don't want to pass over the real, personal consequences of adjunct faculties' contingent status. While that has been documented elsewhere (see, for example, *The Adjunct Project*), and while we continue to work to address such conditions, we'd also like to consider the institutional consequence, at RIC, of these employment conditions.

Institutionally, the overuse of contingent faculty in the FYW Program at RIC means that it is nearly impossible to conceive of and implement a cohesive, coherent writing program. The high turnover rate among adjunct faculty means that while there is often a small core of regular, returning faculty, there are often new faces that come and go. Becky estimates that she has hired approximately 15 new instructors between fall 2010 and fall 2012 (and has interviewed a great deal more). Such a high turnover means that getting everyone “on the same page” is nearly impossible when it comes to such issues as shared outcomes, for example, or even a shared community. Moreover, many of our adjunct faculty are employed at more than one institution: some are graduate students at local universities and colleges (which means that they may be looking to supplement their assistantships or, in the worse case, compensating for the absence of assistantships), while others are piecing together a living wage by working at as many as three different colleges or universities in one semester. A few adjuncts have other sources of income (i.e., a full-time “day job” or reliance on the financial support of a partner).

Professional development opportunities, when offered, are difficult for even the most engaged and enthusiastic to attend. Such instructors are often elsewhere at the given time and day of an event, for example—they are often teaching at other schools. Then, too, because instructors are paid per credit hour, they have not always been compensated for attendance and participation. While voluntary attendance is not uncommon in the FYW Program at RIC, it is unfair to ask adjunct instructors to continually volunteer for professional development.

Thus the stage was set for collaboration between our programs. We had been looking for an opportunity to work together for some time: Becky had access to a budget and could provide compensation when the RIWP was not able; Jenn and other Fellows had expertise in training teachers that could only enhance what the FYW Program had been providing; the FYW Program had a population of instructors that could appreciate what both programs could offer; the RIWP could assist the FYW Program in creating a community of writing instructors, and both programs could combine their strengths to bring something new and innovative to the RIC campus.

The Absence of Professional Development: Adjunct Faculty

As has been discussed and shown in the literature on higher education, time and time again, adjunct faculty are not treated well by the institutions for which they work. This happens everywhere: public and private, large and small schools. And, adjuncts bear the brunt of much of the most challenging pedagogical work in higher education. Adjuncts are most often assigned the classes which enroll the newest students. These are often called General Education courses, or First Year courses, or the dreaded “Pre-Requisite.” Adjuncts have large classes, are burdened with high-stakes assessments (FYW adjuncts at our college submit randomly-chosen student papers for assessment each semester) and with making a good impression on the most impressionable students on campus, the newest ones. Yet, adjuncts are not treated as experts or professionals, as we well know (Jenn is married to an adjunct instructor; Becky was employed as an adjunct in the time between her M.A. and Ph.D. programs) and as these results from the 2012 Coalition on Academic Workforce (CAW) survey demonstrate:

According to data from the United States Department of Education's 2009 Fall Staff Survey, of the nearly 1.8 million faculty members and instructors who made up the 2009 instructional workforce in degree granting two- and four-year institutions of higher education in the United States, more than 1.3 million (75.5%) were employed in contingent positions off the tenure track, either as part-time or adjunct faculty members, full-time non-tenure-track faculty members, or graduate student teaching assistants. (1)

A key finding from this study of 20,920 adjunct faculty respondents is that “Professional support for part-time faculty members' work outside the classroom and inclusion in academic decision making was minimal.” (2) In the area of “institutional support,” the following results were reported:

The respondents paint a dismal picture, one that clearly demonstrates how little professional commitment and support part-time faculty members receive from their institutions for anything that costs money and is not related to preparing and delivering discrete course materials...The data...imply an institutional assumption that part-time faculty members will for the most part appear on campus only to deliver a discrete course and not to participate with students or colleagues in any other structurally supported way. (13-14)

So, it is common knowledge in higher education that adjunct faculty do not receive equitable support in their professional development. The phrase that is most telling, and the one which resonates the most for us, refers to the institutional assumption that adjuncts “appear on campus only to deliver a discrete course.” As we know, this is not necessarily the case for adjuncts at RIC, a dedicated core of folks who hold regular office hours, take advantage of proffered professional development opportunities, and take great pride in their work. This disconnect—between the dedication that adjunct faculty demonstrate and the modicum of institutional support they receive—has resonated for both of us for some time.

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Planning and Realizing the Institute: Our Story

When we met in the summer of 2011, we sowed the seeds for this Institute at Ruby Tuesday's in Johnston, RI. At that meeting, Jenn told Becky about a professional development workshop she was slated to do at the Community College of Rhode Island with their adjuncts who teach writing. Though that workshop ended up falling through, it gave Jenn the idea to target our FYW adjuncts at RIC as a possible audience for our collaborative work. Additionally, in the RIWP's 2012 Site Report, Jenn wrote about this possible collaboration between FYW and RIWP at RIC, thereby introducing this idea to our national office and thereby committing Jenn, and her site, to see the idea through.

Some details for the Institute were easier to work out than others. For example, we decided on a one-day event on a Friday in June. Some of the adjunct faculty who were in attendance would be teaching in a summer program that began the week of July 1. We decided on June 22nd so that those teaching in July would be able to attend, and so that there was sufficient time to prepare between the spring semester and summer sessions. Additionally, it meant that area high school instructors would be available to come and speak to our group of college instructors, since most, if not all, schools in RI were no longer in session as of June 22nd. Finally, we decided on a seven-hour day, beginning at 8:30 in the morning and ending at 3:30 in the afternoon, with a half-hour break for lunch. We recognized that this would be a long day—and it was—but it made sense to us. First, it meant that we would only ask adjunct faculty to commit for one day; given their many obligations, we wanted to make it as easy as possible for the most number of instructors to attend. Second, the day would require a level of commitment commensurate with the RIWP Summer Institute model, where participants would spend the day fully invested with the topic at hand and with the community in attendance. We would also ask participants to meet again at the close of the fall semester, to discuss our Institute's impact (or lack thereof) on their teaching in the fall, and to produce some writing and reflection. Finally, because there were no clear guidelines on what was adequate compensation for adjunct faculty participation in such an event, we chose to offer honoraria of \$350 for the daylong event and subsequent meetings (it was important to us to acknowledge the adjuncts' level of education and expertise, as well as the time commitment on a summer's day). While each of these steps was fairly painless, we still had to decide the most crucial question: what would the group do for the seven-hour day?

We thought carefully about the shared interests of the RIWP and the FYW, and two commonalities struck us most forcefully: one, that the FYW Program taught students who had gone through the K-12 system in the state of Rhode Island and, two, the RIWP had taught and mentored many of the writing instructors who led those very K-12 classrooms. Not incidentally, teachers in the state are currently grappling with the introduction of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), currently being implemented, and the college is currently grappling with the introduction of a new General Education Program which included, for the first time, a Writing in the Discipline (WID) requirement as well as a specific Written Communication outcome for a variety of required courses. Both of these developments will have profound and far-reaching implications for instructors of First Year Writing at Rhode Island College: our students—the overwhelming majority of whom are residents of Rhode Island—would be arriving in our classrooms with a “common core” of knowledge, skills and, to some degree, educational experiences. And, these same students would be expected to leave FYW having met a set of standards and outcomes that would prepare them, at least in part, for the writing they would be expected to do in their other courses. For the first time, the course was truly an introduction to academic writing. That is, instructors could teach the FYW course with the full knowledge that students would be continuing to learn about “academic writing” in other courses throughout their careers at RIC. No longer would WRTG 100 have to be the alpha and the omega of writing—all in a fourteen-week semester.

Thus, we decided that the day would be spent addressing and connecting both of these curriculum developments in light of the demands on and practices of this group of adjunct faculty of first-year writing. Our invitation was distributed to all eligible adjunct faculty (those who taught at RIC in the preceding academic year, although we were happy to make a last-minute exception for a new adjunct faculty member who joined us in the fall of 2012). The invitation, which specifically invoked the two developments, read:

While these changes do not necessarily imply a paradigm shift for you and your writing course at RIC, they certainly do change the make-up of what your students will be coming to your classes having done and learned and what they will be leaving your classes to go and do and learn. We are offering this Institute to you this summer as a way to hone your understanding of the educational and writing landscapes that surround the work you do in your writing classroom.

In response to the invitation, applicants wrote interesting one-page letters to us, telling us why they wanted to be a part of the Institute and why they felt it would enhance their teaching at RIC. The letters revealed how eagerly the group of adjuncts wanted to create a community, and how isolated they felt from some of the methods and practices of other teachers. Some adjuncts asked to know more about what students had experienced before entering their classrooms, and what kinds of writing they would experience after they left WRTG 100. In this way, our proposed topic of the CCSS and the new General Education Program seemed timely. Others brought up new topics, topics we were not prepared (nor able, in the time allocated) to discuss, but which certainly convinced us of the need and desire for future professional development opportunities¹: applicants wanted to “learn new strategies” for teaching, and to think about “in-class writing exercises” and how to “utilize technology,” for example. Overwhelmingly, the theme that resonated most consistently throughout the application letters—and, as we'll discuss below, in their final evaluations—was the desire to share

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and learn from colleagues. Applicants wrote of the need to “explore other participants' experiences” and “to gather together with like-minded peers to talk about our work.” They noted that they “always enjoy interacting with and learning from [their] colleagues” and looked forward to sharing with their peers (terms such as “colleagues” and “peers” appeared frequently; this group of faculty members had a great deal of respect for the work they did, and for the people who shared that work). Indeed, while applicants wanted to learn more about the topics of the day, they also just wanted the chance “to form some bonds,” as one applicant wrote. We were pleased to welcome nine applicants into the Institute and to begin the work of addressing some of their concerns.

In the ensuing weeks, we met several times and communicated extensively over email in order to plan the day and to put into action our idea. We articulated an overarching theme for the day: How do these developments—the new General Education Program and Rhode Island's adoption of the CCSS—affect the work we do in our First Year Writing courses? The idea to invite area (compensated) high school teachers came early on, and we planned to welcome three English instructors from North Providence High School. It is important to note that the three high school teachers were also teachers affiliated with the RIWP. Two of them—Madonna and Janine—are Fellows, having completed the Summer Invitational. Madonna currently co-facilitates the RIWP Summer Invitational Institute, and Janine teaches in both the First Year Writing Program at RIC and the Secondary Education Program. The third teacher, Jason, enrolled in the SI this summer (2012) and currently works as a clinical instructor for RIC's English education program, from which he is a graduate. All of these affiliations are significant, we feel, because they point to the fact that our “One-Day Summer Invitational Institute for Adjunct Faculty of First Year Writing at Rhode Island College” was built on a foundation of a strong network—grown in the First Year Writing Program, in the Secondary English Education program, and in the RIWP—of teacher leaders, the hallmark of the National Writing Project.

At the Institute we also wanted to implement the philosophy of the National Writing Project. Our goal for the morning, for example, was to remind instructors that they were writers, with real experiences as students and as instructors. So, we wrote. And, we shared our writing out loud. We also wanted to use our warm-up writing to help create a collaborative, judgment-free writing and teaching community—something that the NWP, and the RIWP in particular, has done so well and the creation of which is an ongoing goal of the FYW Program. Thus, as participants arrived and partook of breakfast (we can't emphasize enough the importance of food), we asked them to write a bit about what their expectations were for the day, and what they hoped to take away. After some sharing, we asked them to do some sustained writing for a more layered prompt: We asked them to consider their own high school experiences and the kinds of writing they had done, as well as the kind of responses they had received, both in and out of school. As participants shared some of their experiences, which ran the gamut from honest to redemptive to poetic to raw and everything in between, the day began to take shape, and a community began to form. One participant read a story in which she, as a high school writer, “could not wait for Mr. Berenger to read” an essay she had written for English class. Another participant recalled the drudgery of high school writing for her and left us speechless with this final line: “They don't want creative; they just want correct.” Another adjunct faculty participant recalled the “blue grammar book” of high school English, and yet another wrote about her “guitar-playing teacher who examined lyrics of songs as poems.” These personal stories worked their magic as the group quickly coalesced, all the while being reminded of the many paths we take as writers and the impact that teachers have had on us along the way.

From such a strong beginning, the collegial tone of the day was set, and we were able to present and lead discussions concerning the new General Education Program as well as the CCSS. In the morning, Becky presented on the General Education Program. She began by asking participants to consider words or phrases that came to mind when they heard the term “General Education Requirements.” From those responses, discussion ensued as instructors considered their past, present, and future relationship to General Education Programs. Briefly, Becky explained some of the changes that would affect instructors of FYW directly: additions such as the abovementioned Written Communication outcome, the WID requirement, and the new First Year Seminar requirement. From there, participants were asked, in groups, to examine some RIC institutional documents on the new General Education: the list of required courses, for example, as well as the language that described some of the writing mandates and a blog entry on the WID requirement. Before breaking for lunch, all the participants reconvened as one group and discussed their observations, questions, and concerns. Becky ended the session by asking instructors to (re)consider their courses in light of the requirements, and to contemplate how the requirements would affect their teaching in the fall.

The afternoon session, where Jenn presented on the state's adoption of the CCSS, mirrored the morning session in many ways. Participants began by brainstorming on words or phrases that came to mind when Jenn said “CCSS;” they followed this up with reading and discussion (and more word association) of some key CCSS documents, most notably those pertaining to English and Language Arts standards for junior high and high school. However, for the final event of the day, Jenn had invited the North Providence High School instructors, named above, who were (or were about to become) RIWP Fellows. The high school instructors had been asked early on to prepare responses to three questions:

1. What has your experience been like as a high school teacher of writing in Rhode Island?
2. How do you think the Common Core Standards will impact your teaching of writing in high school?
3. Tell us about your classroom practice: What do you notice in your students' writing (strengths and needs)? What kinds of writing do you emphasize in high school? What specific projects do you work on (especially senior project) with your students?

Adjunct instructors responded with questions not only about the kinds of preparation in writing instruction that high school students

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would receive, but were also impressed and interested in the many ways that this group of high school instructors had worked to make the CCSS their own, so to speak: the high school instructors incorporated the CCSS into their curriculum in ways that would best meet the needs of their students. Indeed, in the final evaluations, one adjunct instructor noted that

What [s/he] especially liked hearing is that they [the high school instructors] regard the CCSS as a framework and that they were very clear that they reserved the right to implement requirements in ways that did not compromise their integrity as teachers who know what their students need. More importantly, they were clear that they were the best judges of how to achieve goals.

We found that the time spent with high school and adjunct instructors gathered around a table was one of the highlights of the day; we had expected (hoped) that the high school instructors would talk a bit and there would be discussion, but we did not expect such a sense of camaraderie to emerge so quickly and satisfyingly for all involved. Participants were reminded that they shared students; many of the local area high school students will become the college students at RIC. In that way we realized that each of us are moments on an emerging timeline, that students would be writing for all of us throughout their academic careers. The difficulties, joys, and questions that we experienced as writing instructors were not always unique to our institutions or grade levels; we were (and are) all writing instructors, and so what that meant, at heart, was the same for each of us: we wanted to help students become better writers and to see themselves as writers. That shared experience meant that we could discuss our common goals as well as consider how national and institutional mandates—like CCSS and new General Education requirements—required something different from each group. Thus, our ensuing discussion lasted for much of the afternoon, and several of the adjunct instructor evaluations requested more such community-building opportunities. It reminded us of how much can be learned when K-16 instructors interact; as the above-quoted adjunct’s final evaluation note tells us, “It is, after all, the student who matters.”

This community, we felt, grew throughout the day—and we think that we have created a foundation on which to build (it’s telling that one participant asked about creating an electronic community, like a listserv, so that participants can stay in touch; it’s also telling that, within days of the Institute, two participants sent an email to the group about going out for drinks during the summer). More than one evaluation pointed to the pleasure in sharing with others who taught the same subject, in the same school, but with whom the instructor seldom had time to communicate. We felt that while much was communicated and learned about both the new General Education Program and the CCSS, perhaps the most valuable commodity from this day was the sense of community, of camaraderie, of mutual respect and shared experience, which was built.

Reflections

As we reflect on what we took away from our collaborative RIWP/FYW “One-Day Summer Invitational Institute for Adjunct Faculty of First Year Writing at Rhode Island College,” and as we read through the evaluations, it was clear to us that part of the magic of this day was completely context-specific and group-specific. On this particular day, with this particular group and these particular facilitators, under these particular conditions, we were able to make this Institute a rousing success. So, we did not begin with this end in mind. That is, we were not setting out, necessarily, to write an article or to create a model that can be replicated by others. But, we also feel that there are substantive ideas—not new ideas, necessarily (see, for example, Tremmel, Donahue, Jones, Baker et al, Alsup et al), but tried and true ideas that seem to have been forgotten—that we would like to resurrect here, thanks to our participants’ comments on their evaluations, as a way for our readers to think about collaborative, inclusive professional development around the teaching of writing. In that way, this publication is a kind of rediscovery of those ideas, and a model of how a national problem begins to be rectified on the local level.

Bridging the gap: We hear a lot about is how vital it is to “close the gap” between each of the levels of institutionalized education, traditionally K-5, 6-8, 9-12, and 13-16 (higher ed), so that students move “seamlessly” through the system. What we don’t hear a lot about is bridging the gap for teachers and instructors, something that can only come about through professional development that is collaborative and inclusive. It only makes sense that when we are trying to “bridge a gap,” we start with the teachers; they’re the ones doing the bridge-building, after all. This work is all about promoting a dialogue between and among factions in education that have historically remained separated and isolated from one another:

The disjunction between high school teachers and their colleagues in college is not, of course, a recent phenomenon, which is why I think trying to understand it more fully is so important: conditions that persist often do so for reasons that fade through familiarity. Furthermore, considering that disjunction within an historical context can help us more fully understand the ways in which the origins of our points of commonality and contention still affect how we engage in the teaching of writing. (Jones)

We feel like pioneers in having brought high school teachers and first-year writing instructors to the same table, though we know others are also doing this work. We feel like pioneers because there are so few models for this type of cross-institutional collaboration and because it is so rare to see.

The power of collaboration: We can never dismiss or underestimate the power of collaboration and of nurturing a collegial community of teachers and education professionals. In every other sector of our society, people are talking about building communities, creating networks, bringing people together around common concerns and challenges. It’s the era of the “global society,” and we hear a lot about how we are all connected. And yet, what we see, despite the mounting pressures that challenge

educators and the rapidity of change in K-12 and higher education, is less and less formal collaboration. We so often discuss the importance of creating communities in our classrooms and among our students, yet we so seldom discuss why we do not value creating communities of teachers in the same way. Based on our experience in this Institute, and on the feedback from our participants, we feel very strongly about the need for state and institutional support of opportunities for teachers of all levels and all subjects to learn, collaboratively, from one another as members of an intellectual community of shared respect. And, powerful testimonials like these from our participants’ evaluations of the day only reinforced our belief. When we asked them, “What are you taking away from this day?” here’s how some responded: “A sense of camaraderie, a sense that I am not alone, a sense that my concerns are echoed by others;” “feelings of validation and of being part of a community of instructors who are dedicated to their work and sensitive to their students;” “I got to talk to my colleagues (and boss) about mutual concerns, fears, joys, frustrations about teaching writing... and, I feel like today made me think of the students more, what they’ve been through... I think I lose sight of that sometimes;” “I am taking away a feeling of hope (after meeting the high school teachers) and an energized spirit. I am looking forward to next semester!”

We strongly believe that unless we help our instructors develop and learn and grow as part of a community of practice, we are probably going to get little in return as far as change or transformation.

The pace of change: Change is coming very rapidly to the education landscape, for good or ill, and the changes are being dictated by a very select group that occupies the top of the educational food chain. The “architect of the Common Core,” David Coleman, is currently President of the College Board. He wrote the document with the help of the National Governor’s Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) (Pattinson). Needless to say, Mr. Coleman is quite far removed from the day-to-day work of a classroom teacher. Similarly, the authors of the new General Education curriculum at Rhode Island College most certainly are not the adjunct faculty. All this is to say that the folks making the changes—or at least writing and assessing the educational mandates—are far away from the majority of folks who need to implement the changes. And, we feel, unless we are reaching and speaking to the instructors who are providing the direct service to students, unless we are attempting to educate them about these changes and how they might impact their instruction, institutions can’t really expect change to actually occur as rapidly as they would like (or, perhaps, at all).

All instructors need time to take in new information, to assimilate it (or not) into their thinking, to imagine how the changes might affect their practice, to talk with colleagues who are struggling with similar questions, and to readjust their instruction based on the new information. The ridiculous expectation, in K-12 and in higher education, that we are all going to, in an orchestrated, “seamless” fashion, adjust our practice to incorporate changes without some time, space and guidance to help us along, is setting teachers and instructors up to fail. We strongly feel that any amount of institutional change depends on consistent and accessible high-quality professional development, as we’ve described it in this article.

A welcoming space for teachers: An important factor in our Institute was the space in which it was held. We deliberately chose to invite adjunct faculty to the home of the RIWP because the RIWP is located on the margins of our campus in an old, historic farmhouse. Alumni House, home of the RIWP, is a cozy space, a house complete with a working kitchen—where we gathered in the morning and afternoon to get our food and drinks and to talk—a large “dining room” with two fireplaces—where we sat around a table together and wrote and shared—spacious and grassy grounds, and most importantly, no fluorescent lights or cinder block walls or heinous “chairdesks.” The RIWP physically sits on the boundary of our campus: it is of the College and outside of it, a place that connects those two worlds to each other, an alternative space that allows for a break from institutional décor and, thus, a sort of mental vacation from institutional thinking. We believed that in order to create a safe space in which adjuncts and teachers alike could feel that their voices were heard, valued, and not judged, we had to move the Institute away from the institutional panopticon. Meeting in this kind of space, we feel, was essential to creating the community that we felt was formed that day.

In the context of professional development, it is vital for teachers and instructors to feel like they are welcomed in the spaces in which they work, that they are valued inhabitants of the same space, and that they are, indeed, an important part of the processes and the systems that run the space. We feel excited about the possibilities that lie ahead for future RIWP/FYW collaborations, as it has become glaringly clear to both of us that teachers and instructors are actively seeking out these kinds of collaborative and intellectual opportunities to share their ideas, their experiences, and their practice with colleagues. As we look ahead, we hope to bring more and more teachers to the table, talking about writing, looking at student work, sharing lessons that work and those that do not, and struggling together around the implementation of new standards and mandates. We are already thinking about our 2013 Institute.

Notes

1. All participants signed an informed consent form, giving us permission to use their work (anonymously). To honor that, we have chosen not to acknowledge them individually, but we thank them for their participation, enthusiasm, and generosity.

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Collaboration: Talk. Trust. Write

Mark Letcher, Kristen Turner, Meredith Donovan, Leah Zuidema, Cathy Fleischer, Nicole Sieben, Jim Fredrickson, Laraine Wallowitz, and Sarah Andrew-Vaughn

We have long recognized English classrooms, at all levels, as sites ripe for collaborative activity among students; when students read, write, and learn together, the classroom becomes a microcosm of the work we do as professionals in the field. In writing, collaboration can be vital. Collaborative writing often leads to projects that are richer and more complex than those produced by individuals, potentially engaging multiple audiences in broader conversations. However, collaboration can also present its own particular set of challenges, ranging from the practical (How do authors find each other and determine publication avenues?) to the more theoretical (Is the negotiation of power an inherent part of the collaborative process, and if so, how can it be successfully managed?).

With these issues in mind, the Conference on English Education’s Commission on Writing Teacher Education sponsored a roundtable session at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, in Las Vegas, NV. Titled “Igniting Our Professional Work Through Collaboration,” the session gathered pairs of collaborative writers from across varying teaching contexts, with the shared purpose of discussing and examining the nature and challenges of their work together. Collaborative groups represented in the session included teacher educator and classroom teacher (Cathy and Sarah), professor and graduate student (Kristen and Jeta), and teacher educators across teaching contexts (Jim and Leah, Laraine and Nicole). As the session concluded, and the roundtable discussions extended into the hallway, some of the participants arrived at the idea of capturing their conversations in writing. Focused on the idea that effective and productive collaboration often follows a recursive cycle of “talk, trust, write,” the following sections expand on how successful collaborators manage the multiple issues of composing, both individually and together. To our original triad, we have also added “teach,” acknowledging the vital fact that our actions as collaborative writers can, and often do, carry implications for our own teaching.

Talk

Writing in the Qdoba parking lot: Talk as a vehicle for gaining trust, writing drafts and teaching what we do (Sarah Andrew-Vaughan and Cathy Fleischer)

The story of our collaboration begins in talk.

Cathy and her English education colleagues at Eastern Michigan University were looking for a high school teacher to teach one section of a required pre-service undergraduate course called “Writing for Writing Teachers.” Sarah—a high school English teacher in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and veteran of the Eastern Michigan Writing Project Summer Institute—was fired up by her professional experiences and excited about the opportunity to teach the course, and Cathy—who had not yet met Sarah—was asked to serve as her mentor. And so the two of us decided to meet for coffee to talk about the class. What we didn’t yet realize was that our initial meeting would lead to what’s become a productive and long-standing collaboration, a collaboration that quite literally has changed both of our lives.

At that coffee date, we talked about our teaching, our beliefs about literacy, and our classroom practices, and as we talked, we learned from each other: Sarah shared with Cathy specifics about her approaches to teaching English in a diverse high school; Cathy provided Sarah with new ways of thinking about research-based practices. Most immediately, Cathy talked about a project she used in her version of Writing for Writing Teachers—what she called the Unfamiliar Genre Project. In this project, pre-service teachers were asked to learn about a genre that they found uncomfortable, unfamiliar, or just plain hard. The goal was to have English majors—secure in their abilities as readers and writers—to experience the kinds of discomfort that many of their future students might experience when asked to write in *their* future classes.

Intrigued by teaching this project as part of the college course, Sarah immediately embraced the idea and then extended it—thinking about how this project might connect to her teaching of high school students. How could she better help her students *really* understand genre? Could the unfamiliar genre study—with its focus on individual study of genre—help?

And so we talked, and our collaboration began in earnest. Cathy’s pre-service teachers and Sarah’s high school students became penpals, sharing drafts of writing as Sarah began exploring the Unfamiliar Genre Project in her classroom. During the conversations, we each brought our expertise - Cathy, articles about genre and genre theory; Sarah, her experiences in the classroom. And we kept talking about how the theory and the practice might intertwine.

Our collaboration took a new direction when Sarah decided to respond to a call from *English Journal* about research and