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Jennifer S. Cook
Rhode Island College

Becky L. Caouette
Rhode Island College

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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 (复印茂 Press, 2008). Her research interests include writing teacher education and connections between classical and digital rhetoric.

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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. Cassette
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 60-90% 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 find each 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 partnerships: 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, public 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...
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 predecessor, was building a novel partnership with the state's largest public university, the University of Rhode Island (URI). Jenn used her connections with the URI's Graduate School of Education to launch the RIC Writing Program (WRTG), a required writing course for the undergraduate community (individual schools or programs might require other courses, but WRTG is the primary writing course for the entire institution). Jenn hired Becky to be the Director of Writing which, for all intents and purposes, primarily meant overseeing one of the English Dept's General Education areas of teaching in the College of Arts and Sciences and the English Department, our academic home? 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 pool 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 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 credits). However, 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. Becky began by changing—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 100P.”

The biggest challenge 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, have each stated the status on the treatment and status 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 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. To date, in spring 2012, the FYW Program could boast being taught by approximately 15 new instructors between fall 2011 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 do not have a residence in or near Providence; others are employed by the state and it is unclear whether they are even allowed to teach more than one section per semester. This high turnover also means that the majority of our WRTG 100 instructors do not have as much experience teaching writing, an area of concern for both Jenn and Becky, as the instructors teaching the core writing course. Rather, we lament the consequences of their contingent positions. We don’t want to pass over the real, personal consequences of adjunct faculty’s contingent status. While that has been documented elsewhere (see, for example, The Adjunct Project), and while in context 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 group of instructors who are dedicated to teaching writing and to the students in the classroom of RIC. Rather, we lament the consequences of their contingent positions. We don’t want to pass over the real, personal consequences of adjunct faculty’s contingent status. While that has been documented elsewhere (see, for example, The Adjunct Project), and while in context to work to address such conditions, we’d also like to consider the institutional consequence, at RIC, of these employment conditions.

Of the instructors who work within the program. As the success of our Institute makes clear, we are fortunate to be home to some excellent writing instructors—people who are dedicated to the teaching of writing and to the students in the classroom of RIC. Rather, we lament the consequences of their contingent positions. We don’t want to pass over the real, personal consequences of adjunct faculty’s contingent status. While that has been documented elsewhere (see, for example, The Adjunct Project), and while in context to work to address such conditions, we’d also like to consider the institutional consequence, at RIC, of these employment conditions.
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 as our initial work. Additionally, at the end of the workshop, Jenn mentioned her interest in engaging with the CCSS—what does it mean? How could we use our students as resources for this work? Becky, who is an English writer, “could not wait for Mr. Berenger to read” an essay she had written for English class. Another participant recalled the drudgery of writing 14-week semester.

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 opportunities: “teaching as a craft rather than a skill,” for example, 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

and learn from colleagues. Applicants wrote of the need to “explore other participants’ experiences” and “to gather together with like-minded peers to discuss the challenges students face.” They told us that “they were enjoying interacting with and learning from their [colleagues]...and looking forward to sharing their peers’ (terms such as “classmates” 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 way Jenn and Becky taught, professionals in writing were ready to partner with them in this professional development experience. 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 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 and speak to our group of college instructors. Jen and Becky articulated an overarching theme for the day: How do these developments—the new General Education Program and the CCSS—impact the work we do in FYW? Jenn, the Institute’s Director and a teaching professor who examined lyrics of songs as poems. These personal stories worked their magic as the group quickly coalesced, all theWhile these changes do not necessarily imply a paradigm shift for you and your writing course at RIC, they certainly

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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 CCSS their own, to develop curriculum in ways that would best meet the needs of their students. Indeed, in the final evaluations, one adjunct instructor noted that what she especially liked hearing was that the high school instructors recognized the CCSS as a framework and that they had been very clear that they reserved the right to implement requirements in ways that did not compromise their identity as instructors 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 expected that the group of 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 uniform 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 common goal—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/FW “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 the completely context-specific and group-specific. Participants felt, 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.

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 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.

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 for all change or transformation.

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, which is the location of 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 that had belonged to the house for many years, its wood panels and trim worn from use, its walls and ceilings of plaster and wainscoting—the rand, spacious ground floor of the old farmhouse, neighborhood houses, the farmhouse had been home to many generations of students; walls or heinous “chairlifts.” 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 decor 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.

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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.
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 trial, 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.

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...