Forums: Bridging the Gap between High School and College Writing

In 2008, two professors from our community college’s English Department, the dean of our arts and humanities division, a dean from admissions, and a dean of academic affairs decided to pilot a meeting between teachers of high school–level writing courses and teachers of college-level writing courses. Initially, our goal encompassed the simple act of starting a dialogue. Three years and eight meetings—called forums—later, we have become a group that embraces more than mere dialogue; we consciously work to inform one another’s teaching and ultimately our students’ learning and readiness for college-level writing. Along the lines of the LINC Program on which Merilee Griffin, Amy Falberg, and Gigi Krygier have reported, we hope to “magnify those preconceptions that teachers and instructors have regarding the curriculum and instruction in both high school and college” (301).

The Planning

Believing that the Writing Forums had to “move beyond the blame game” (Kittle 134), we college organizers embraced an “us” mentality geared toward inquiry and dialogue, and we decided upon narrowing our first audience to the high school English teachers already working in our ACE (Advanced College Experience) Program, our dual-credit/concurrent enrollment classes. We felt these educators already straddled the high school and college worlds, and we encouraged them to bring along a colleague or two. (Interestingly, we now have more non-ACE teachers than ACE teachers in our group, and we have also added members from three other local four-year colleges.)

We organizers also decided upon a core list of necessary elements for every session, for we believed that these simple guidelines would engender successful sessions. They included the following:
1. We would always have a concrete, written agenda, though we would will-
ingly suspend that agenda if participants’ engagement warranted doing so. They—not the organizers—would drive the work of the forums.

2. We would always engage in small-group activities before we came together as a large group. We would always use concrete, written directions for those activities (see sample in Appendix A). (The one time we have strayed from this model—for a speaker’s presentation—exit surveys showed dissatisfaction.)

3. We would begin each small-group activity with some kind of individual writing that participants ultimately shared.

4. We would always provide in hard copy whatever reading material we had distributed electronically (see sample list of readings in Appendix B).

5. We would assign small groups randomly based upon some indicator—a colored dot, a letter, or number, etc.—written on the name tags, folders, or reading material.

6. We would always conduct some kind of exit survey so that the participants drove the forums’ content.

7. We would always give the participants something—a folder, pen, pad, group of readings, etc.—with which to walk away from the meeting.

8. We would always send the formal invitations to the forum in hard copy at least thirty to forty-five days before the event and again in electronic format seven to ten days before the meeting. In each case, we would ask for an RSVP by a specific date.

9. We would always invite school administrators as well as teachers.

10. We would disseminate an email address list of all participants so that those who wished to continue the conversation outside of the meetings could do so.

11. We would always provide some kind of light refreshment.

As we contemplated our ability to adhere to these basic organizing principles, we pondered budget. We selected a vary-by-semester model; we opted to utilize the financial resources we could get from the budgets of various chairs (Humanities, English, ACE, Public Relations [for folders], Book Store [for donated pens, pads, etc.]) and from our own rotating refreshment contributions. Various English Department professors shared their photocopy allotments to produce the reading packets. We relied upon participants to attend for the substance offered, for neither we nor the school districts could offer stipends.

Driving Rationale

As we college-level teachers and administrators contemplated this endeavor, we understood the very impediments to K–14 collaborations that studies have identified: the position of community colleges within multiple school districts, the difficulties of centrally organizing meetings, and the differences in the culture and goals of each type of institution. Yet, we also knew that “a shared dialogue about how student writing is perceived and valued could bring some common focus to
a national hodgepodge or curricula that currently lacks much coherence” (Griffin, Falberg, and Krygier 302). While we fit the national pattern of having our dual-credit/concurrent enrollment courses continue to expand at rapid rates—“1.2 million enrollments in CE courses from students in 11,700 public schools” (Hansen 25)—we longed for another mechanism for community college teachers of writing to facilitate with high school teachers a coordinated understanding of each other’s pedagogy, methodology, and beliefs about the teaching of writing. Given the number of students currently enrolling in community colleges—“7.0 million students or nearly 43 percent of all in higher education by 2015” (Cohen and Brawer 454)—all of them required to take a freshman composition course, we thought at least at our own community college we should strive to have this conversation.

That Levin and Calcagno’s longitudinal study reported that “more than 60% of first-time community college students took at least one remedial course” (qtd. in Tinberg and Nadeau 38)—including those in writing—told us something important about that need. Studies have reported that

high school [English] teachers and college [English] instructors for the most part agree on which skills are important [:] writing process and purpose, [including highest ratings for] “Selecting a topic, formulating a thesis”; “Editing and proofreading”; and “Revising, focusing on content rather than mechanics”; [. . . and] “Developing logical arguments and supporting them with valid evidence”; “Writing an argument or persuasive essay”; “Writing expository prose”; and “Analyzing an issue or problem” (Patterson and Duer 82).

Yet, simultaneously, these high school teachers “may have no way of knowing how well their efforts match up with expectations of instructors at post-secondary institutions” (81). In addition, these studies have found that a difference in the expectations and content given to non-college-bound students—the very ones who frequently attend open-admissions community colleges—may exist (84). Clearly, community colleges must take a role in establishing this vital dialogue. As Patrick Sullivan has noted, “We must at the very least clearly understand the full variety of factors that help shape this debate [about the definition of college-level writing], and respect the imposing complexities that make determining a shared definition [. . .] problematic” (375). Precisely this idea motivated our community college to establish Forums: Filling the Gaps, A Dialogue among Teachers of Writing about Writing.

We organizers knew that as Cohen and Brawer have noted, community colleges

have to reconcile their relations with the secondary schools from which they broke away. Education at any level depends on preparation of the students. [. . .] The dearth of communication between college and secondary school staff members, the lack of articulation in curriculum, the failure to share teaching materials except on the basis of random encounters: all must be mentioned. (310)

Taking up this call for communication and exchange of ideas, we at the college began our forums by ascribing to the following contentions:
1. As Patrick Sullivan, Pat Belanoff, Karen Greenberg, David Charney, and others have concluded, finding an absolute standard of college-level writing that we can apply universally, given the multivalent and constantly shifting nature of language, is impossible.

2. College-level writing necessarily engages writing, reading, and critical thinking. (Sullivan 384)

3. If we plan to talk about what college-level writing is, we had “better bring along samples of student writing that illustrates concepts being explained and supports claims being made” (Lunsford 178).

4. If we accept T.L. Good’s 1982, A. Alfred Hess’s 1988, and Festus Objakor’s 1999 premise that teachers’ levels of expectation relate to students’ performance, then we must contemplate some common ground in expectations and standards.

5. Given the dominance of states’ standards regarding reading and writing on both the high school and college level—and the impending considerations of federal accountability standards—we “need to reassess the place such skills have in [high school teachers’ and college instructors’] instruction and expectations, respectively” (Patterson and Duer 83).

6. Given that studies suggest that perhaps high school English teachers “do not give enough attention to grammar and usage, given college instructors’ expectations” (82), we need a frank dialogue about this pedagogical issue.

7. As Kathleen Blake Yancey notes, “the composition of the twenty-first century will indeed take very different forms than its cousin in the twentieth—because of digital technology, and because of new ways of defining teacher, and because of new ways of understanding [. . .] spaces” (ix). As such, we need to consider the implications of these new structures for our definitions of high school-level and college-level writing, yet we must also acknowledge that composition must be “characterized for intellectual rigor as much as for our current innovations in process and metacognition” (206).

8. If we accept the idea that “The one-size-fits-all model of freshman composition [. . .] has outlived its relevance [. . . and that c]olleges and universities need to make first year English courses more demanding (Joliffe and Phelan 103), then we do need to establish a difference between high school expectations and community college expectations for writing.

9. Through the teaching of college-level writing, teachers should promote “interpretation, critique, meta-awareness, and dialectical types of intellectual work” (Durst 6) that makes of writing “an externalization and remaking of thinking” (Lavelle and Zuercher 373). Yet, community college teachers of composition really know very little about the ways high school teachers of English prepare students for this kind of work, and high school teachers of English really know very little about those expectations and the ways we expect to see such goals evidenced in student writing. We need to learn from each other.

10. “The positions secondary English teachers occupy in their institutions, the sources of their authority with students and colleagues, and their attitudes toward the university intersect with old and new knowledge about the teach-
ing of writing and have to be taken into consideration” (Farris 107). As such, we need to engage in “disciplinary conversations [. . .] investigating issues and texts that are perhaps new to all of us” (111).

Lastly, we considered the possible—and perhaps contradictory—role that Jeanne Gunner’s premise (“To attempt to define college-level writing outside human social context is to invite its commodification, to erase the subject himself/herself, to justify mechanistic curricula, and to support institutional atomism” [119]) might play among the other ideas we had chosen to embrace, for on some level were we attempting, in fact, to discover some common form of writing curriculum? We decided to keep this complexity in mind as we moved forward with the forums.

Implementation

Given that, as Patrick Sullivan and Howard Tinberg suggest, one important factor to consider whenever we discuss college-level writing includes the kinds of assignments we require (xiv–xv), we started our forums at this site of revelation. We gave to each participant copies of samples of directions only for three types of writing assignments: high school English assignments, college English assignments, and college essay assignments from outside the discipline. Asking all participants—arranged in small groups—to identify the goals of each assignment, the writing skills necessary to complete the assignment successfully, the commonalities among the three types of assignments, and the differences among the three types of assignments, we engaged the forum members in a discussion that necessarily revealed to everyone in concrete form what these assignments looked like and what kinds of objectives they addressed. Asking each group then to report its conclusions to the large group, we found the discussion broadening to include issues of pedagogy and methodology as well as the concrete details of what elements made a writing assignment succeed or fail.

In the exit survey (see sample in Appendix C) regarding this first forum, comments consistently repeated sentiments such as the following:

Respondent 4: It was great talking to college English teachers and finding out how to bridge the gap—so good to be able to bring back to the high school students what college expects of them. I now know what kind of tasks college-level teachers expect of college students, and I can reshape my own assignments. I don’t think I’ll give so many of those “creative assignments” like writing the journal of a character anymore.

Respondent 8: I love the concept of the forum—the exchange of ideas is so worthwhile. It’s helpful to know the needs of college professors and how we can address high school issues and prepare them for college and the real world at the same time. I see now that I don’t have my students reading enough nonfiction. We’re all about poetry and short stories and drama and analyzing characters and figuring out plots. I’d always considered literary technique but never rhetorical strategy. I am ready to change some of my approaches.
Likewise, the college professors—a mix of full-timers and adjuncts—looked favorably upon the exchange of ideas:

**Respondent 6:** I like pairing with other college teachers and high school teachers. I came away with new ideas and really thought about my teaching of writing. I have seen and will use new ways to break down the directions of the assignments. Simply naming a specific audience, for example, is something I'd never done!

**Respondent 9:** I enjoyed the dialogue. It’s enjoyable to be a student/participant again. I am now rethinking my assumptions about the students who come to me in college. Rethinking those assumptions will change the way I introduce assignments and the ways I create the various parts. Knowing that most are familiar with journal-writing has inspired me to use journal writing as the source of choices for their topics and theses in a given assignment.

Such responses demonstrated that from having this kind of connection, collaboration, and intellectual dialogue, teachers on both levels gained concrete strategies for their own teaching. They demonstrated that both parties learned something and, quite importantly, thought about their own teaching of writing.

During that first discussion of writing, a repeated point of interest emerged: that of state mandates aimed at standardizing outcomes of the teaching of writing on both the high school and college level. Given that assessment has surfaced as the current watchword for every level of education in the United States, that while some of our community college’s instructors did have some awareness of state requirements, few had ever read the standards or seen the test, and that few high school teachers understood that the state university board had its own set of basic writing and communications standards, viewing each other’s mandates and assessment tools became an activity requested by a majority of the participants. Doing so during our second forum opened not only a discussion of the content goals of the state for each level of learning but also a dialogue and intellectual inquiry about the ways we achieved the attainment of such standards, about whether we deemed the standards useful and rigorous enough, and about grading standards in general. In fact, participants became so engaged in the discussion that they shifted from small groups to whole-group exchanges without any prompting and ultimately abandoned entirely the second half of the session’s written agenda (see sample in Appendix D). They left the forum eager to have another conversation, and in the exit surveys they asked for earlier electronically distributed materials and readings before the next session so that they could “really think about them ahead of time and spend the whole two hour forum talking.”

**Results**

As we engaged in the next six forums—one about samples of completed assignments and their evaluation rubrics, one about college readiness goals and setting goals for our forums, one about the future of English teaching (for which we brought in Dr. John Mayer), one about using technology in the writing classroom, and two
about assessment and assignment design—and looked forward to our ninth forum in the fall of 2011, we understood that just as in writing, meaning “unfolds in the shared space between the reader and writer” (Kearns 343), and that the meaning of our work as teachers of high school and college composition unfolds only in an intellectual conversation that shares, exchanges, and reshapes ideas. That very interfacing opens us not only to knowledge of one another’s goals, pedagogies, and methodologies, but also to an engagement by each participant in a process of contemplating his or her individual ways of teaching writing.

As we contemplated our own teaching in the context of others’ teaching, we saw some very concrete results, including the following:

1. A sharing of assignments and even some collaboration on assignments.
2. A change in the selection of high school reading material.
3. A change in college professors regarding assumptions about incoming students.
4. An understanding of the ways state standards affect the design of high school writing assignments.
5. An understanding of the ways those state high school standards do not necessarily meet the college-level expectations of writers.
6. An increased awareness of and reminder that teaching to objectives matters more than teaching to tests.
7. The creation of an avenue of communication for teachers at both levels of education; that “invaluable [tool] for establishing continuing, common goals and a greater level of success for students, teachers, and instructors alike” (Griffin, Falberg, and Krygier 301).

Our particular way of conducting forums works for us; it may not necessarily work for every community college, for truly no right or wrong way of conducting such conversations exists. What matters more than format or numbers or length of meetings or anything else is the opening of the dialogue, that interfacing between one level of teaching and the next. It matters not just for us, the teachers of writing, but also for our students, who must somehow successfully bridge the gap between high school–level and college-level writing. We need to create our own bridge to each other before we can offer one to students.

**APPENDIX A:** Sample Activity Directions Sheet

Activity 2: Identifying the shared goals and mapping some stepped shared strategies for reaching them: 4:10–5:00 p.m. (50 minutes)

1. Participants will remain in their color-coded small groups.
2. Each group will receive a set of directions, a large piece of white poster paper, many colored markers, and a set of readings.
3. Group members will do the following:
A. Read the short selections, “Student Readiness: The Challenge for Colleges” and “A Perception Gap over Students’ Preparation.”

B. On the second (and now blank) index card in your folder, please record your own impressions and reactions to each of the following:
   1). When it comes to homework . . .
   2). When it comes to reviewing material in class . . .
   3). When it comes to evaluating high stakes tests . . .
   4). When it comes to understanding what’s required for students to succeed in college in general and in college-level writing in particular . . .

C. Briefly share and discuss your written responses.

D. Now return to thinking about the first part of our meeting today, when you discussed writing goals, the ways you attempt to achieve them, and the obstacles you face in doing so.

E. Choose one goal you have in common or that you perceive as a two-step continuum.

F. Record that goal at the top of the big white piece of paper.

G. Make two columns under that title. Label one “For the High School Level” and the other, “For the College Level.”

H. Then, after brainstorming and discussing your ideas and reaching a consensus, record the following information in each column:
   1). What achievement of the goal looks like (the specific objectives met, skills evidenced, etc.)
   2). A specific assignment that could demonstrate those goals
   3). Specific steps to take to achieve the goal as evidenced through the successful completion of the assignment

I. Underneath the chart you have just created, note the ways the work you have just designed for two different levels of study complements each level and leads logically from one level to the next.

J. Select someone from the group to explain your plans and conclusions to the large group.


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**APPENDIX C: SAMPLE EXIT SURVEY**

*Please complete the following survey anonymously by checking those answers you deem appropriate. Thank you for your participation!*

1. The *Forums* members should meet:
   - ______ a. monthly.
   - ______ b. bimonthly.
   - ______ c. once a semester (biannually).
   - ______ d. other: __________________________________________________.

2. The *Forums* meetings should:
   - ______ a. always meet at Westchester Community College.
   - ______ b. rotate meeting places among the schools of the various participants.
     Our school ____________________________________________ could host a meeting.

3. Other topics for consideration at future *Forums* meetings should include all of the following:
   - ______ a. sessions on strategies.
   - ______ b. rubric creation and discussion.
   - ______ c. strategies for teaching to specific goals.
   - ______ d. designing assignments.
   - ______ e. discussion of particular issues teachers of high school English face.
   - ______ f. discussion of particular issues teachers of college English face.
   - ______ g. meeting high school and college state assessment goals.
   - ______ h. other: __________________________________________________.
4. The best days and times for us to meet include all of the following:
   _____ a. Mondays, between 8:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.
   _____ b. Mondays, between 3:30 and 5:30 p.m.
   _____ a. Tuesdays, between 8:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.
   _____ b. Tuesdays, between 3:30 and 5:30 p.m.
   _____ a. Wednesdays, between 8:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.
   _____ b. Wednesdays, between 3:30 and 5:30 p.m.
   _____ a. Thursdays, between 8:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.
   _____ b. Thursdays, between 3:30 and 5:30 p.m.
5. I found today’s Forums meeting:
   _____ a. very useful.
   _____ b. somewhat useful.
   _____ c. not at all useful.
6. Other comments and/or suggestions: ___________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

**APPENDIX D: SAMPLE AGENDA**

1. Welcome and Introduction/Opening Remarks: 3:30–3:40 p.m.
   A. English Department Chair
2. Small Group Activity: 3:40–4:45 p.m.
   A. Each participant will receive upon entering the room a nametag with a colored dot on it, a folder, a pen, a pad, and a packet of readings about college readiness standards (already sent via email as well).
   B. Participants will move into groups based on their colored dot.
   C. Each group will complete the following activity:
      1). Each individual should peruse again the readings about college readiness goals, paying particular attention to those they think are related to teaching English/writing. (10 minutes)
      2). Each individual will fill in the “As I See It” sheet (located in the folder). (10 minutes)
      3). All of the small group members will discuss their responses with one another and then fill in the “Common Themes” sheet (located in the folder). (20 minutes)
      4). Based upon the discussion and the “Common Themes” responses, the small group will create a mission statement and list of goals for this Forums group and record these ideas on the “Forums Mission Statement and Goals” sheet (located in the folder). (25 minutes).
3. Sharing the Results of the Small Group Activity/Whole Group Discussion: 4:45–5:20 p.m.
   A. Each small group will present the goals it created.
   B. The large group will discuss these goals and formulate a whole-group mission statement and set of goals for our meetings.
4. Completion of Survey re Future and Thanks and Good-bye: 5:20–5:30 p.m.
Works Cited


Farris, Christine. “The Space between Dual-Credit Programs as Brokering, Community Building, and Professionalization.” *Yancey* 104–14.


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