

Spring 2018

Engaging in Writing Dialogue: High School to College Writing Symposium

Mark Dziedzic

Gretchen McClain

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/crosspol>



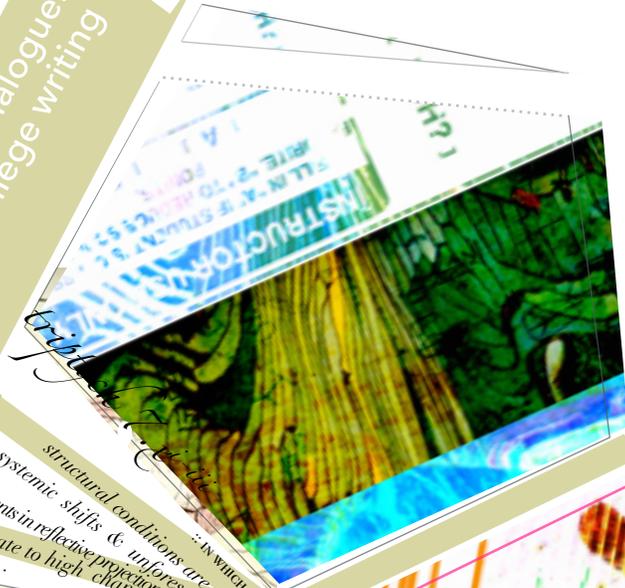
Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dziedzic, M. & McClain, G. (2018). Engaging in Writing Dialogue: High School to College Writing Symposium. *Crosspol: A Journal of Transitions for High School and College Writing Teachers*, 3(1), 82–89.

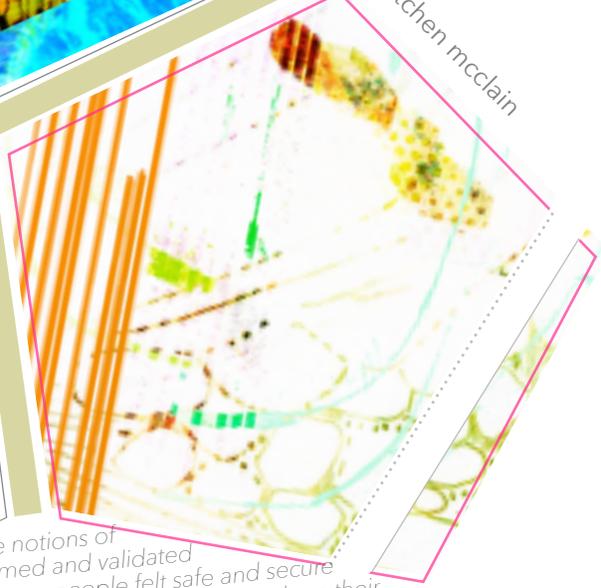
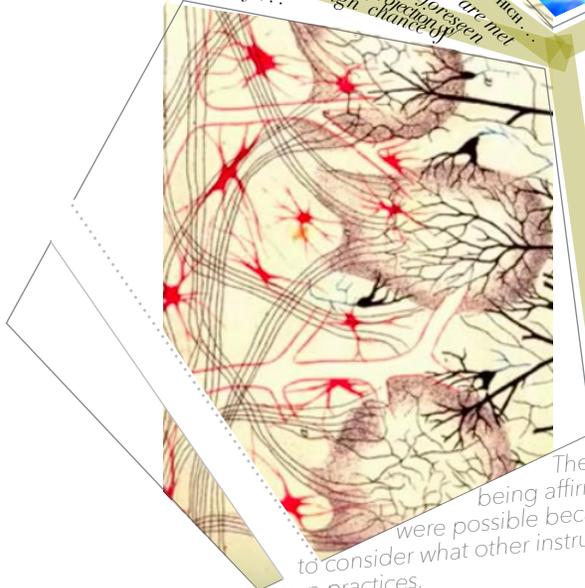
This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Crosspol by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact justin.white@utrgv.edu, william.flores01@utrgv.edu.

engaging in writing dialogue:
high school to college writing
symposium



mark dziedic + gretchen mcclain

...in which...
structural conditions are met
for systemic shifts & unforeseen
alignments in reflective practices
a moderate to high chance of
bluesky...



The notions of
being affirmed and validated
were possible because people felt safe and secure
to consider what other instructors were sharing and to share their
own practices.

Engaging in Writing Dialogue: High School to College Writing Symposium

Mark Dziedzic + Gretchen McClain

The term “College and Career Readiness Standards” is likely seared into the consciousness of every educator who has taught at the middle or high school level in a US classroom anytime in the last five years. Educators have been subject to professional development trainings dedicated to “unpacking” the standards, aligning curriculum to the standards, and the development of common assessments for evaluating students writing for college readiness. These professional development sessions often are led by representatives from the state department of public instruction, school administrators, or outside consultants who are knowledgeable about what is in the standards. While these may be laudable task led and facilitated by people with extensive knowledge of the standards, they leave out an essential component: college level writing instructors sharing their insights about what skills and dispositions students need to find success in writing in the post-secondary world.

This fundamental flaw in the system was one of the factors that led Gretchen McClain to take a leave of absence from her job teaching high school English in 2014 to pursue her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Gretchen felt a disconnect between what she was being told was “college ready” writing and what she thought her students needed to be successful writers in college. Gretchen entered her graduate studies intent on exploring what it means to be a “college ready” writer and what she could do as a high school teacher to help her students make a smoother transition to the writing demands and expectations at the collegiate level.

From her days teaching high school and through the conversations she had with other teachers during her time with various Greater Madison Writing Project programs, Gretchen knew other k-12 teachers shared many of the same questions about what it meant to be a “college ready” writer. What caught her off guard was that when she began talking with her new colleagues in the first year writing courses in the English department at UW, they too expressed similar questions about what writing, writing expectations, and writing instruction looked like at the high school level. It was this newfound understanding that a lack of understanding existed at both the high school and college level that eventually led to the creation of our high school to college writing symposium in 2015.

Guiding Principles

We did not know exactly what should be done about the lack of opportunity for high school and college writing instructor to dialogue, but we knew we needed to do

something. While unsure of exactly what we would do, we were committed to two underlying and foundational principles guiding our work:

- There are many ways to teach writing. This day was not going to be about the “right” way to teach writing. Instead, it would be a chance for good writing teachers from each level to share their guiding principles, beliefs, and practices as a way to generate conversation about the what, how, and why in regards to our teaching of writing.
- Teachers from across grade levels can and should learn from one another by openly sharing and discussing their teaching practices. This symposium could not be another chance for teachers to be talked at and/or talked down to about their failure to adequately prepare students – this had to be a collaborative day where high school teachers had a chance to learn more about the writing teaching and expectations at the college level and college writing instructors had a chance to learn more about what and how writing is being taught in the high schools.

With these two principles guiding the work, we set out to create an experience that would benefit both high school and college writing teachers, would allow both sets of teachers to develop a better understanding of where their students are coming from or going to, and would lead to better writing experiences for students.

We began working with the faculty members supervising the first year writing program in the English department and decided that a one-day symposium would be the optimal format. While all would have preferred a longer, more sustained effort, we knew one day was likely all we would be able to get people to commit to during the school year.

Format

Knowing we would have teachers for only one day, we decided to break the day into three sections and to focus on a particular theme for each part of the day. After much discussion with high school teachers in our Writing Project, faculty from the English Department, and graduate teaching assistants, we decided the three areas of focus would be:

1. the standards, objectives, philosophies, and beliefs that drive our teaching,
2. what and how we teach writing in our classrooms, and
3. how we assess student writing and provided feedback that moves writers.

Focusing in on these three areas would allow us to discuss the why, what and how we teach, as well as how we evaluate our effectiveness. While we understood the three themes of the day are intimately entwined with one another and in many ways are inseparable, we felt pulling them apart and focusing on each area individually would

allow for the most focused and substantial discussion about three overarching topics to successful writing classrooms.

In addition to what would be discussed at the symposium, how to facilitate the discussions on the topics was going to be equally important. With a stated purpose of having **collaborative**, cross-level discussions, it would be important that knowledge from all levels was represented and respected. It was decided that brief panel presentations followed by more intimate cross-level small group table discussion was the best way to create a cross-level collaborative environment for the day. Each of the three sections for the day would follow the same format: a 30-minute panel with five people each doing a brief presentation, followed by 40-minutes of cross grade-level table discussions.

(See the links for ARTIFACTS 1 & 2 for additional details on the time structures and the guiding questions for each focus area panel.)

The panels would allow us to identify teachers from various contexts and with particular knowledge or expertise related to each topic we wanted to highlight and ensure everyone was heard. To maintain the focus was on “college readiness,” not just writing in the UW-Madison English first year writing courses, each panel would include at least one writing teacher from a local high school, UW-Madison, and a two-year technical school or community college. In addition, we would identify and invite panelists from other four-year universities, the state Department of Public Instruction, college writing centers, embedded undergraduate writing fellows, teacher preparation faculty, and instructors teaching writing intensive courses outside of the English department. In order to situate both the overall program goals and the specific goal of each focused session, potential panelists were provided with a description of the day, the panel focuses, and a set of sub-questions related to the guiding questions for each panel.

(See the link for ARTIFACT 3 for more details on the program description and the guiding questions and sub-questions provided to panelist.)

If the panel presentations were meant to share information and provoke thinking, then the table group discussion were meant to be the place where teachers could dig deeper, discuss how what was presented would/would not work in their particular contexts, and share experiences and questions with one another. Like the panels, table groups were purposefully mixed to ensure that there were as many different teaching levels present at each table. Table group discussions would bring more voices to the conversation and would encourage everyone to move beyond listening to sharing with teachers from other schools and grade levels.

In order to keep the table group conversations focused, Greater Madison Writing Project teachers would purposefully be seated at each table in the room and would function as table group facilitators if needed. While we expected there to be little problem with teachers talking about how and why they teaching writing in the ways they do, we also wanted to make sure the conversations, as much as possible, stayed focused on the theme for the session and grounded in practice. At the conclusion of each table group discussion time, the table group facilitator would be responsible to provide a brief overview/highlight of their tables discussion. Several minutes for responses to the table group highlights, questions to the panelists, and general follow-up questions were also allotted before drawing each session to close.

The symposium would end with closing remarks and feedback, but before the closing, there would be half hour for team planning, individual follow-up or connections with presenters or other teachers, and/or individual reflection/planning. While a half an hour wouldn't be as much time as desired, we did feel it important to dedicate a period of time at the end of the day for action planning so the enthusiasm generated during the day could be translated to actionable classroom practices.

Sample symposia programs, email invitations to potential panelists describing the panels and guiding questions, and symposium feedback forms are included in the appendices. These appendices provide additional details and insight into how the program was scheduled, what was discussed, and how feedback was collected from those in attendance.

Lessons Learned:

Fast forward three years and three symposia and much has been learned about bringing together high school and college/university writing instructors to discuss what it truly means to be a college ready writer, what we can do to better prepare students for the writing they will be expected to do in at the post-secondary level, and how at the post secondary level we can build on the work taking place in high schools. During those three symposia we have heard over 250 writing teachers share their teaching practices through panels and table group discussions. In addition, we have reviewed the written feedback from all three years, engaged in follow-up conversations with attendees, and reflected on what we have learned. From this we identified four recurring themes that stand out and will continue to guide our work as we go forward with the venture to bridge the gap between high school and college writing. We use quotes from the most recent symposium attendees' feedback to introduce and exemplify each of the key lessons learned.

1: "I was inspired by speaking with the college folks because they made me feel like I am on the right track. I am certainly walking away better informed,

and I have a list of next steps that is heavy with ideas for improving our writing.”

“I have a much better understanding of the concerns of k-12 teachers and also about how students make the leap from high school to college.”

Time to discuss teaching writing across grade levels is valuable and desired. As a National Writing Project site, we have a foundational principle and belief that the best teachers of teachers are other teachers, and the feedback from the symposia confirm that hearing from teachers at other levels was fruitful for both high school teachers and college instructors. The consistent across the evaluations from the three years has been the value of gaining first hand knowledge regarding what is happening and what is expected at other levels. Participants commonly wrote about gaining new understandings, being enriched, inspired, and more informed. In addition to gaining insight into the writing and expectation across grade levels, symposia attendees also talked about how discovering there is shared language, approaches, beliefs, and struggles across grade levels created an affirming and validating experience.

2: “Best value: time to talk honestly and examine some vulnerabilities.”

It is of the utmost importance to establish a climate that is supportive, trustworthy, and collaborative. From the outset – in planning, in setting up panels, and during the welcoming and opening section of the symposia – we tried to make clear this was to be facilitated as a learning experience for all involved, not a blame game from upper level teachers to lower level teachers as too often is the case when cross grade level discussions happen. Our panelists modeled how to talk honestly about the strengths and weaknesses of their approaches to teaching writing, their pedagogical practices, the systemic structures of the institutions the promote or hinder writing, and the writing abilities demonstrated by their students, and table group facilitators worked to maintain the collegial and supportive conversations in the small group discussions. The notions of being affirmed and validated were possible because people felt safe and secure to consider what other instructors were sharing and to share their own practices.

3: “Nice combo of ‘experts’ and discussion time. Beneficial to hear ideas and have moments to process info with other teachers.”

The format of panels followed by small group discussion is conducive to making sure all levels are heard by all and all voice have a chance to be heard. The panel presentations ensured everyone in the room had the opportunity to hear each of these perspectives. On the other hand, the small group discussions allowed everyone the opportunity to contribute their own experiences and practices and consider how what was shared could influence future teaching.

There was general consensus and appreciation for hearing from panels and then having time to discuss in small, cross grade level groups. As can and should be expected with any such event, a few people wanted to hear more from the panelist, while others wanted more time with small group discussion. However, those sentiments were expressed by relatively few and they were equally split between those that wanted more panel presentation and those that wanted more time in small group.

4: “I loved having a mix of people in our small group.”

Teachers have precious limited time to collaborate, even with colleagues in their own department, and we have seen teachers usually want to be together with colleagues from their own schools when they attend. This is understandable, and in most instances something we would want to encourage, but with our stated goal of cross grade level discussion, it was imperative to have people mix it up. The first year we simply asked people to mix themselves, and it was ineffective. The feedback at the end of the symposium indicated that too many tables lacked a diversity of teaching levels and the panel presentations were the only time they heard much from teachers at other grade levels. Years two and three we started the day with assigned table groups and then asked all the post secondary teachers to move before session two and all the high school teachers to move before session three. We found this strategy worked to ensure all table groups had various levels represented and also made sure participants were able to hear from a larger number of attendees.

While assigning tables and moving people throughout the day has helped ensure cross grade level discussion, we still struggled to have enough diversity of teaching contexts because we have not had enough instructors from technical colleges, two-year campuses, and other four year universities to have each represented at every table. Drawing a larger, more expansive college/university representation to future symposia is necessary to ensure the goal of cross grade level discussions take place in table groups.

Unintended Lesson

Lessons learned in teaching are rarely contained to what was planned, and that was the case when an unplanned but nonetheless fortunate event fell into our lap. One of the university writing instructors was scheduled to teach class during the final session of the day. Not wanting to miss out on the symposium or cancel class, he asked if his class of undergraduates could come sit in on the symposium. Wanting to do what we could to keep as many university writing teachers participating, we decided to invite the undergraduates to attend the final panel and sit in on the discussion.

Having the students attend turned out to be a good decision that led to an additional important, and often missing, voice added to the conversation. The students shared with the teachers what they found most valuable from their high school writing experiences, what they wish they had gotten in high school, and what they have experienced as writers at the university level. While there were obviously no questions about the students on the evaluations, many teachers, both those at the high school and college level, talked during the final question and answer and comments session how much they enjoyed having the students and their first hand experiences as part of the conversation.

Just as increasing the number and diversity of post secondary writing teachers is a goal, so too is considering ways to bring more student voice to the symposium. If we are going to critique professional development for missing out on teacher voice, then we also ought to hold ourselves to the standard and find more ways to hear from students what they believe it means to be a “college ready” writer and what instruction they feel has helped or hindered their own preparation and successes in writing.

Final Thoughts

The symposium was developed to address a need, and the large attendance and positive reviews indicate it is addressing the need. While questions about how teachers translate the symposium discussions into classroom practice and if these discussions impact school/district level policies, feedback from the three symposia indicates teachers on both ends of the teaching spectrum leave the symposium better informed about writing and writing expectations across levels. The symposium is not a cure-all for enhancing writing instruction and/or preparation for writing at the post secondary level. Instead, we see it as just one step in the long journey to create an open and on-going dialogue between the levels and a model of what is possible when collaborative professional development is well planned and facilitated. Obstacles to more cross-level collaborative conversations remain – time, money, teaching loads, etc. – and we continue to explore ways to address these obstacles because we have seen the value which these collaborative conversations bring to all involved.

Artifacts in Action

ARTIFACT 1: [Symposium Workbook](#)

ARTIFACT 2: [Symposium Schedule](#)

ARTIFACT 3: [Symposium Invitation](#)

ARTIFACT 4: [Survey of Writing: Secondary Level](#)