It's Not the High School Teachers' Fault: An Alternative to the Blame Game

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The question posed by this volume's title, taken from Patrick Sullivan's thoughtful essay included in this book, is one that is manifestly at issue within the profession of teaching writing. I often encounter colleagues, at my own university and beyond, who lament the poor writing of incoming college students. Almost inevitably, an attempt to assign responsibility for this apparent deficit ensues. College faculty assume high school teachers aren't doing their jobs; high school teachers complain that middle schools don't prepare students adequately; middle schools wish elementary schools did a better job; elementary schools decry the family situations that provide too many students with a literacy-poor start to life. My own career history as a high school English teacher (1987–1992), graduate student composition instructor (1993–1998), assistant (now associate) professor of English (1998–present), and writing project teacher-consultant (2000–present) has given me ample opportunity to see this blame game played out at all educational levels. But it is a game I choose not to play. Rather than be defensive and accusatory, I would like to be descriptive of my continually evolving perceptions and representations of what constitutes college-level writing, and in the process examine the pedagogical implications of that evolution. How did my sense of what it means to write at the college level develop? What light does that evolution shed on issues surrounding the teaching of college preparatory writing at the high school

level? What kinds of practical steps can be taken to facilitate more shared assumptions about the composition pedagogy among writing teachers at high schools, colleges, and universities? It is my hope that answering these questions will be more productive than trying to lay blame at anyone's door.

When I began to teach English at Kelso High School, the centerpiece of a small lumber-mill city in southwest Washington, I found the prospect of teaching writing daunting. I was a successful writer myself, if the grades in my college English courses were any indication, but I discovered that the ability to write did not translate into the ability to teach writing. The curriculum in my school specified separate courses in literature and composition at each grade level, with the composition courses devoted to teaching in the *modes* paradigm: informational, comparison/contrast, definition, persuasive, and research essays. I duly followed the curricular materials provided, but never felt that my students were particularly engaged in the writing tasks they were given. On those occasions when students did seem engaged, it was usually due to having the opportunity to argue about extremely polarized issues like abortion or gun control—topics that aren't particularly amenable to reasoned discourse due to a lack of shared underlying assumptions.

It wasn't as though my undergraduate major had neglected to anticipate that I would one day need to teach writing; in fact, I had taken a class specifically devoted to the teaching of writing. Taught by Suzanne Clark at Oregon State University in the mid-1980s, the course provided smart, provocative readings in the theories that inform writing instruction (*Teaching Writing: Essays from the Bay Area Writing Project* and Erika Lindemann's *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* both remain prominent in my memory). While the intent of the class was to help me understand effective practices in composition pedagogy, its actual impact on me was more personal than pragmatic: I learned about my own writing processes, which was revelatory enough in its own right. It wasn't until I was in my own classroom, facing those small-town high schoolers, that I began to wish that I had been better able to contextualize the rest of that writing course's content.

While laboring under the constraints of the high school classroom—with its large class sizes, limited time, and exhausting workload—I found few opportunities to revisit the ideas from Professor Clark's course. Instead, I fell back on the resources at hand: the textbooks adopted by the school, the quick advice of colleagues, and my own memories of what writing assignments in high school were like. Still, I mostly floundered at teaching writing, especially when it was isolated from literature. This was an idea shared by my colleagues; by the time I left Kelso High, we had transformed English coursework into year-long courses that covered both literature and composition. At the time, we made the argument—and it's a compelling one—that it's more sensible to teach the complementary literacy skills of reading and writing together. And I'm sure that we believed it. But I think that, for me, part of what made the change in curriculum attractive was that the teaching of writing in isolation, which daunted me, would disappear, and the already-overflowing literature curriculum would easily spread to fit the larger timeline. And because most English teachers love literature (myself included), the pushing aside of non-literature-based writing assignments was more than palatable.

In practicality, then, this change of curriculum allowed me to continue to offer students somewhat watered-down versions of the kinds of writing I was asked to produce in college English courses. Character analyses, explications of themes, authorial stylistic techniques—these were the subjects I asked students to address in their writing. To maintain some connection to the old modes, I asked students to compare and contrast John Knowles's novel *A Separate Peace* and the then-recent film *Dead Poets Society*. But my assignments, as a whole, followed what Margot Soven (borrowing from Rexford Brown) has called the "contract of vagueness," wherein English teachers provide fuzzy directions for writing, and students accept the situation because they implicitly understand that unclear assignment parameters are part of the culture of English classes (135–36). But even if I was less than confident about my specific writing pedagogy, I nonetheless believed that I was duly preparing students for college writing. In reality, I was propounding some well-worn and firmly entrenched myths about college-level writing.

One of the most common of these myths involved correctness: "College professors," I would intone to my students, "will give you an F if you make more than three errors in a paper." This particular belief was widespread in my school; every English teacher used it as something of a cudgel to motivate students to proofread carefully. Somehow, the fact that neither I, nor anyone in my acquaintance, had ever received an F for reasons of correctness escaped our recollection. While always able to produce clean written work in compliance with the rules of standard English, I'm sure that typos, misreadings, and sloppy editing must have added up to at least three errors in a few of my college papers. But no Fs (and yes, I do know that that's a fragment).

Still, I faithfully followed this myth, all too often applying the archetypal red pen with liberal abandon. If I'm honest about it, I focused on error due to the fact that—as Patricia Dunn and Kenneth Lindblom compellingly assert—beyond observing that my students had committed surface errors in their writing, I didn't "know what else to tell them" (45). In fact, I'm certain that on more than one occasion, I overvalued papers with marginal insights simply because they were relatively error free. Some students even revised their work to make it less complex—filled with simple vocabulary and safe sentence structures—to assure that it had fewer errors. While this in itself was bad enough, what is worse is the mistaken impression that I'm certain many of my students gained from my instruction: clean presentation trumps smart, complex argument.

The second myth I freely propagated concerned form. I taught the five-paragraph essay to my students. I even had a variety of bright, colorful bulletin board themes devoted to this odd genre, perhaps most notably a large, laminated picture of a hamburger, with the buns representing the introduction and conclusion, and meat, cheese, and lettuce standing in for the three body paragraphs found in each five-paragraph essay. While I readily enough taught this form of writing, I honestly cannot say I looked forward to reading the student work with any relish. But I told my students, as well as myself, that this writing form would serve them well in college. I was a (willing) victim of what Mark Wiley has called the "pedagogical blindness" that goes hand-in-hand with formulaic writing instruction (61). The insistent focus on

form made other, very important aspects of writing become, in practical terms, invisible to me.

I do not mean to downplay the role of either correctness or form here, both of which are indisputably important to clear writing. However, correctness and form attain meaning only through the purposeful communicating of important, relevant ideas. Why, then, did I teach writing in these ways, focusing on correctness and form to the detriment of more substantive issues? The answer lies in expedience. I taught the five-paragraph essay because it was easy to teach, not because I thought it was the best way to teach writing. I marked papers for grammatical errors because it was easy to see and circle those mistakes, not because they were the most important aspect of my students' writing. I admit this not with pride, but at least with honesty; expedience and efficiency matter tremendously when facing five classes a day, with over thirty students per class. If I had had better strategies for responding to student writing more productively, or (better still) for creating writing assignments that would lead to rigorous, interesting, and insightful student work, I hope that I would have employed them. But the fact was that I had only vague ideas about what was expected of students when they had to perform at college level, and even less-firm ideas of how to teach students to reach that level.

Despite my shortcomings in the field of teaching writing, I became an effective classroom practitioner during the five years I taught at Kelso High. I developed a professional teaching persona, able to maintain discipline, communicate efficiently, and establish meaningful rapport with students. In short, I had become confident in my abilities as a teacher. When I entered the PhD program at the University of Oregon in 1992, therefore, I actually felt affronted that I—with over 4,000 hours of classroom teaching under my belt—would have to be *trained* in teaching, including classroom apprentice work, before I could be assigned to teach first-year composition. In fact, I went so far as to appeal for a waiver from these requirements. As it turns out, the decision by Jim Crosswhite, then the director of composition, to deny my appeal was one of the best things that came from my graduate program. He did not question my ability to teach—the *how* of teaching—but wanted to ensure that the *what*

of my teaching would be in keeping with the university composition program's philosophy.

That philosophy, based on the central tenets of John Gage's *The Shape of Reason*—namely, situating enthymeme-based inquiry within active, engaged classroom discourse communities—radically reshaped my own understanding of what constituted college-level writing. I suppose that the primary revelation involved my own renegotiation of the role of the teacher in a *discourse community* classroom. This model places primacy on the idea that "[s]tudents write at their best when they have something to say and someone to say it to" ("Program Philosophy"). The "someone" to whom the writing is addressed is not, importantly, the teacher alone; rather, it is the classroom community, whose values and assumptions have been shared and made explicit. In such a context, the teacher's role is decentered. Students address an audience of classmates who are well informed regarding the questions at issue within the essay. Course participants' ideas are written in response to what others have said—be they fellow students, the instructor, or a published writer. The writing produced by students was not expected to merely demonstrate compliance with mandates regarding form and correctness, but to represent focused inquiry into issues that the class had agreed can be answered in different ways by reasonable people.

The teacher in this college-level writing class was akin to a mentor, facilitating specific avenues of inquiry, guiding discussions and classroom activities in productive directions. For such a class to operate effectively, the students must be able and willing to take responsibility for engaging with the course materials and discussions. This, for me, was the primary difference in assumptions about writing education between college and high school. As a high school teacher, I found the institutional context to privilege a pedagogy of compliance, wherein students were expected (and accustomed) to simply follow directions and do their best to meet the teacher's expectations. There was, in other words, a tacit understanding on the part of students (in the form of consent) that the teachers were in exclusive possession of academic power. The college writing classroom, on the other hand, resisted such a stance actively, often using as anchor readings texts that call into question traditional educational practices (e.g.,

excerpts from Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* or selected writings by John Dewey on democracy and education).

One of the interesting outcomes of my new position teaching college composition was the ability to see how the myths I had formerly spread affected students entering college. Often, students would produce, in response to a course assignment, a rather bland five-paragraph essay with few surface errors; they would then be particularly nonplussed to find less-than-complimentary feedback given to work that would likely have been praised by their high school teachers. Of course, this also gave me pause, since such students were only behaving in ways that I would have encouraged when I had been teaching high school. While I readily admit that my practices as a high school teacher were underinformed, I always felt confident that my teaching at that time was in keeping with something of an educational Hippocratic tenet: First, do no harm. Upon seeing the cognitive dissonance evident in students trying to seamlessly use the five-paragraph form in the college classroom, though, I had to rethink that confidence.

I want to pause here and clarify a couple of things I've said so far. First, I am not trying to write an academic version of evangelical transformation. A testimonial of conversion—"I was a blind, sinful high school teacher until I saw the light and became a born-again writing instructor"—is not my object. Such a perspective (aside from being simply unseemly to me) implies a highly judgmental attitude toward high school teachers, for whom I have deep respect. Second, I am not attempting to make a case that all high school teachers believe, behave, or teach the way I did, but I have spoken to enough teachers to know that my story is not unique, either. What I hope to be outlining instead is that two factors strongly affect the transition of writers from high school to college. First is that the circumstances and contexts of high school and college writing classes are very different, and those circumstances and contexts strongly impact pedagogy. Second, the avenues of communication between high school and college teachers of writing are not nearly as open as they should be. The effect of these two factors is widely differing sets of expectations among students, high school faculty, and college writing teachers.

While the pragmatist in me suspects that there is little to be done to minimize the difference in contexts of high school and college classrooms, my involvement in a number of collaborative programs helps me hold out hope for improving the sharing of knowledge among writing teachers at all levels. I have collaborated with local high school teachers through work with the Northern California Writing Project, as well as through California State University programs like the Collaborative Academic Preparation Initiative and the Early Assessment/Academic Preparation Programs (EAP/APP). In each of these experiences, I have learned much about the curriculum and practices of secondary teachers in my area, and the insights shared by those teachers have productively informed my own practices as a university teacher. Creating learning partnerships between college and high school, with genuine give and take on each side, is in my view imperative to minimizing the propagation of myths about college-level writing.

I have been fortunate enough to have forged just such a partnership with Rochelle Ramay, a colleague from the Northern California Writing Project who chairs the English Department at Corning High School. Ramay and I have team-taught professional development institutes ranging from 25 to 120 hours throughout northern California. Focusing on academic reading and writing in high school, these institutes have allowed Ramay and me to read professional books together, synthesize various perspectives into some coherent theoretical tenets, and implement the same ideas—albeit with some variance to account for different populations and abilities—within our respective classes. There is no hierarchy or posturing in our partnership; we are simply two reflective, inquisitive teachers who collaborate on issues in teaching writing, and share our findings with others (through inservices, institutes, conference presentations, and articles). We are, through our work together, both better able to understand the expectations and constraints put upon writers at the high school and college levels.

While a one-to-one partnership such as mine with Ramay is ideal, it is far from being easily replicated en masse. But other, more widespread programs are making the attempt to bridge the

gaps between high school and college. The EAP/APP initiative, sponsored by the Chancellor's Office of the California State University (CSU), seeks out potential CSU students and assesses their readiness for college writing. Using an augmented set of questions on a standardized test administered during the junior year of high school, the early assessment portion identifies specific students who would benefit from reading and writing instruction tailored especially to smooth the transition from high school to college.

The creation of the curriculum for that transition period came out of the CSU Task Force on 12th Grade Expository Reading and Writing, of which I was a member. Comprised of CSU faculty from seven of the university's campuses (representing composition, reading, and English education), as well as high school teachers and administrators, the task force began by drawing connections among three key documents: the *Reading/Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools*, which outlines content standards and pedagogies for English; Harrington's *Focus on English*, which describes the English Placement Test taken by incoming CSU freshmen; and *Academic Literacy: A Statement of Competencies Expected of Students Entering California's Public Colleges and Universities*, a text created by a joint committee of faculty from community college, CSU, and University of California campuses. The former two emphasize discrete skills that are to be mastered and measured, while the latter focuses instead upon "habits of mind" shared by students who succeed in higher education.

As we discussed ways of articulating these documents' shared characteristics, a basic template emerged for creating assignment sequences that began with reading and ended with writing. What we tried to do was ensure that the skills in reading and writing outlined by the standards (both for public school and for college admission) were wedded, with explicit scaffolding, to the academic dispositions described in the *Academic Literacy* document. For instance, the habit of mind described as "read[ing] with awareness of self and others" may be rightly expected of students, but is unlikely to be directly taught. The task force template ensures that such metacognitive aspects of reading and writing, which are usually invisible to the outside observer but are integral to

academic habits of mind, become specific targets of pedagogy. With strategies such as using different highlighter colors to identify passages that would be important to a variety of readers, the idea of reading with "awareness of self and others" becomes an intellectual practice, not just an ideal abstraction.

While the task force has created a curriculum that, we believe, will help California's students make it through the transitional period from high school to college, it will be for naught if it is not implemented. And this, really, is the sticking point. The CSU Chancellor's Office has committed to providing professional training in the new curriculum to all twelfth-grade English teachers in the state, in the form of three days of training conducted by teams of CSU and high school faculty. At the time of this writing, these trainings have only just begun. But while I hold out hope for their success, I am cautious about showing real optimism. This is because, as I outlined above, I firmly believe in the need for genuine, long-term partnerships between public school and college teachers. As a high school teacher, I experienced many afternoon workshops, day-long inservices, and other one-shot professional development scenarios that I found interesting and provocative, but that in the end did not particularly impact my actual teaching practices. Real change takes time—sometimes very significant quantities of time, carefully structured to allow for experiencing and discussing new ideas, experimenting, and reflecting on how those new ideas can be meaningfully incorporated into already-existing curricular frameworks. I fear that, without being able to establish the kinds of professional relationships that are predicated on mutual respect for teaching abilities, subject matter knowledge, and academic values, any ideas being propounded by college writing teachers will be seen as just another mandate from above.

What needs to be kept in the forefront of discussions surrounding contentious ideas—including what constitutes college-level writing—are the concerns shared by the interested parties at all levels. Writing teachers need to avoid assigning blame for the level of student work, and instead collaboratively describe what we do, why we do it, what our struggles are, and how we might serve our students better. As a university instructor, of course I care about having well-prepared students enter my institution.

But when I think about literacy education in a more global manner, I care more that all students—college bound or not—are prepared to read and write critically and competently enough to be active, informed citizens. I suspect that most teachers of writing, at whatever educational level, feel the same way. The challenge that faces us in easing the transition from high school to college, then, involves finding, establishing, and maintaining the goals for writing shared by faculty at secondary and postsecondary institutions. Such collaboration would require genuine change, not just on the part of individual high school and college faculty but also on the institutional structures that limit collaboration. My overwhelmingly positive work with the Writing Project, where long-term partnerships are the norm rather than the exception, reinforces my belief that the potential for lasting, far-reaching rewards make such reformative efforts worthwhile.

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