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Collaboration as Sharing Experiences: A Detroit Public Schools/ University of Michigan Course

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We meet together once a week from 4 to 7 P.M. in the imposing Rackham building across the street from the Art Institute in downtown Detroit.[1] All of us have been teaching throughout the day, and four o'clock hardly seems like the best time to begin anew talking about our days at school. Despite fatigue and the inconvenience of the hour, fifteen teachers from the Detroit Public Schools arrive for our graduate course: Composition 600, Theory, Practice, and Implementation of Writing Across the Curriculum Programs. Teachers fill their cups of coffee, tea, or maybe glasses with water and then take seats around a set of library tables arranged in a square. The class begins slowly and informally, with stories of the past day or week, sometimes recounting joys, sometimes concerns, sometimes academic activities, sometimes social ones.

As with any course we have prepared an overall plan for each session, which we would sketch out briefly to begin the three-hour class. We might have readings to discuss, projects to present, group activities to complete, proposals to evaluate, or occasionally a speaker to receive. As we introduce our proposed schedule informally, we invariably take time to encourage talk among teachers who, throughout the week, have not seen each other. Even teachers from the same

school report feeling isolated from their colleagues. Therefore, informal exchanges are an essential ingredient of our course plan: our theory is that teachers will motivate each other when they have an opportunity to talk about teaching and learning. In fact these teachers often remind us that the demands of their full school days ordinarily prevent much regular interaction, even among colleagues in the same discipline, let alone among different disciplines in different buildings.

We begin each class by listening to teachers' stories: A junior high special education teacher talks animatedly about a visitor she had in her class that day, an African-American hockey player; she shares some of the writings and drawings that her students produced as a result of their discussion with him. A language arts teacher, originally from India, talks quietly about introducing her students to Indian culture by bringing in music, drawings, and artifacts. A French teacher reflects on a recent Pride Day held at her school, telling how the excitement of the festivities surrounding it made conventional academic work difficult. A high school science teacher describes working late into the night monitoring activity in one of Detroit's neighborhoods. He is tired but proud that the coalition of parents, teachers, and business people of which he is a part have helped make the week of Halloween safer for the city's inhabitants. After ten to fifteen minutes, this conversation gradually dies down; we turn our attention to the afternoon's agenda.

Introductory Reflections

As college teachers, we are often looked at as depositories of information to whom students can turn for answers. We like that role; however, to play the role too heartily means we spend considerable amounts of time lecturing instead of listening. Students might like this, insofar as it allows them to be passive learners; but educators, especially those in the field of composition, know that learning happens best when students are active participants in the knowledge-making activity. Moreover, because our students are also teachers, their voices and reflections on course information centrally contribute to developing the subject matter for our discussions. We want to explore theory with teachers through examining their actual practice, whenever possible vitalizing theory through their perspectives as educators.

We also know that using writing to learn in the disciplines is a more complex activity than simply requiring students to write (not to suggest that teaching people to write is ever simple). Writing to learn as a new curricular objective requires interdisciplinary coordination that eventually results in students writing in all classes, not just in language arts. Using writing effectively in many kinds and levels of

courses depends upon teachers articulating and acting on a common set of assumptions about students' learning through writing. For these reasons we help teachers to articulate their own assumptions about writing and learning upon which they might then design new initiatives. We need to explore with them assumptions about how students learn and about the expectations about language that shape academic discourse. Finally, we want teachers to begin talking with other teachers in their schools to uncover attitudes toward writing held by teachers in disciplines other than their own.

In each class meeting, two or three teachers took responsibility for discussing main issues raised in readings we provided, and for relating issues raised in readings to situations in their own schools. For example, in Detroit a heated discussion about institution of all-male academies had been fueled by a disproportionally high dropout rate of young males; the essay "Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys" by Jawanza Kunjufu (1985) took on immediate relevance, as teachers voiced opposing sides in a spontaneous debate over the merits and problems of gender-differentiated schooling. In another session, work by Gardner and Hatch (1989) on multiple intelligences was regarded to be justification for bringing into the classroom a number of different language experiences that would allow students to build upon their own strengths as thinkers and writers. In a third instance, a lively discussion of differing forms of academic argumentation emerged from teacher-led reports on the significance and possible application of Jack Meiland's proposition (1981) that a discernable format for written academic argument can be taught quite directly to students, regardless of the content being taught, and is of considerable assistance to students as they try to understand the complex nature of academic and social problems.

In what appeared to us to be a striking contrast to abstract discussions of theoretical issues, our group consistently interpreted theory with respect to their concrete experience. The results were sometimes unexpected. For example, teachers read an article by Imani Perry (1988) in which she contrasted her experiences as a student in both public and private schools. The result is an indictment of the public school system as a cold, impersonal environment that favors superficial qualities such as good behavior and factual precision over intellectual development. In another article, Else Weinstein (1988) relayed her difficult experience as a high school teacher in an honest and forthright manner. She depicted a public school setting similar to that of Perry, revealing difficulties she experienced assimilating herself within rigid, entrenched practices of a large and sometimes adversarial system. Conversations resulting from both these articles surprised us. We had selected these articles assuming teachers would sympathize with the authors, finding

in their critiques of public school a language by which to better critique the daily school environment. Instead, our teachers argued against the attitudes revealed in these two essays and preferred a picture of the public school environment as a place where there was no time for self-pity and where teachers must not find reasons to quit. It might be argued that we had been naive in thinking that our teachers would not challenge problem-centered depictions of their schools. Indeed in listening to these teachers talk about their determination, we were reminded of how little is written about the personal qualities that lead to success in education despite obstacles. For our purposes, the teachers' resistance to negativity in the articles we had selected provided an excellent transition into deeper individual evaluation of good teaching—and the relationship of students' writing and learning to that commitment.

Following our discussion of attitudes toward teaching, we assigned practical activities outside of class to encourage teachers to try more writing in their own classes and then talk with other teachers about using writing to learn. For example, one of our assignments asked each teacher to talk with a colleague who might be hostile to using writing in her or his subject area. In part, the assignment read:

> We have discussed the pitfalls and obstacles which you anticipate to be the hardest to overcome if you were to start a writing to learn initiative in your school. For this week, and you can work collaboratively on planning this (be sure to include all of your names on the report), make some contact with your biggest adversary. Plant the idea of writing to learn in your conversation with this person and see what happens. For next week write a report of what happens including:
>
> - who you talked to
> - exactly why you considered this person an adversary or obstacle
> - how you approached the person or persons
> - how you talked about writing to learn
> - the person's or persons' reactions

The responses to this assignment were varied. In general, teachers received a warm reception to their overtures, a somewhat surprising phenomenon since they contacted people they had thought would resist using writing in their teaching. One teacher, after advocating writing in disciplines to her administration and colleagues, concluded that

> our school does seem ripe for writing to learn. It seems that almost everyone is trying some kind of writing. Even the principal is anxious for this kind of writing to learn across the curriculum and the crossing

> of all disciplines. She is encouraging teachers to form cross-discipline teams to share ideas and activities.
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> Perhaps not all of our teachers are so willing to try learning to write activities, but a great many are. At least most of the people I know are. (Of course I do have a tendency to avoid people who are likely to give me a hard time.)

Another less sanguine, though not so surprising, report from one of our science teachers indicated that the typing teacher "is an obstacle because she feels the educational system is under a strain and overworked. So she would resist any change that would cause more work." Further conversation revealed that the typing teacher was not familiar with strategies of writing to learn and after hearing more about them became more positive, saying that "she would cooperate with a team of teachers if she did not personally have to generate or design an activity, nor persuade her co-workers in the business department to cooperate also." In each case of reporting back to our entire class, teachers described their efforts to introduce writing to learn in their schools as a process of talking together and gradually understanding each other's teaching situations. In doing so, they developed increased confidence in their own colleagues' willingness to evaluate their school's potential for change and support of classroom innovations.

Teachers as Agents of Change

In addition to the stimulating classroom discussions and initiatives that grew out of assigned readings, we thought of ourselves as preparing teachers to serve as school leaders in writing to learn beyond our course semester. Toward that end, we spent several weeks working on proposal writing for funds available in Michigan for teachers; some of our class members actually received funding for classroom projects in writing to learn during the year. However, we found that not all teachers were comfortable taking on projects that extended beyond their already challenging classroom responsibilities. Nonetheless, we felt that even those teachers who did not submit proposals at the time benefited by writing them for the class and from general presentations and discussions of proposal writing. In other words, everyone practiced analyzing and presenting a proposal in specific categories: needs, objectives, materials, results, and evaluation techniques.

In connection with our proposal writing and presentations, we asked teachers to imagine a possible timeline of activities during a typical school year that might promote writing to learn in all disciplines. For this activity, teachers from the same school or same discipline formed small groups to consider sequential initiatives within their respective situations.

At the end of the semester we assigned a reflective essay, the goal of which was threefold: (1) reconsideration of readings and initiatives and synthesis of them, (2) discussion of actual classroom needs and practices, and (3) formulation of an image of one's self as an agent of change. These goals were incorporated into a handout we provided teachers for writing these essays:

> Here are some things to think about as you reflect on this class and your work as a teacher.
>
> 1. Think ahead to next semester. Are there specific things from this course that you would like to incorporate into your course? into your school?
> 2. Are there other goals you have for fund raising? What are they? And what, if any, relationship is there between your fund raising goals and the ideas we have raised this course?
> 3. What reading had the greatest impact on your work as a teacher? And why?
> 4. As honestly and frankly as you can, describe why you believe writing to learn works. Use examples both from the readings and your students' work.
> 5. Consult with members of your faculty about writing to learn across the curriculum and begin mapping out strategies with them whereby more writing, or more coordinated writing, might be assigned among various courses, and report on those plans and conversations.

Three Teachers' Voices

By the end of the semester-long course, then, we hoped to develop a shared history of common knowledge that would be useful to teachers. We observed that our arrival-at-class conversations gradually developed into familiar stories, rather than random details about school days and isolated events. One of us speaks again about a parent who is very ill. We discuss his health, which has not improved, and the difficulty of sustaining all aspects of our lives. Another teacher catches us up on the progress of her son's computer course, while a third teacher, excited by her students' development, has brought more writing to share.

To the final meeting of the class in December, each of us brings a colleague from our schools. We have a table spread with different kinds of food: chicken, salads, desserts, and breads that represent a collective preholiday dinner for everyone. In this last three hours, some teachers present model writing to learn lessons; all of us, guests included, participate in the writing "lessons" and talk about them afterward.

On this night, teachers give us their final reflective papers; we recall that there have been six out-of-class writing assignments prior to this one, and all papers were intended cumulatively to create and refine individual perspectives on using writing to learn and to encourage plans for future schoolwide writing projects. The final reflective essays proved to be distinctively different statements that demonstrated teachers' thinking about writing, personally as well as professionally. The teachers' voices eloquently addressed educational issues that we had raised throughout the semester: the need for school-based faculty development, collaborative classroom and program initiatives, and opportunities to develop direct relationships between one's own students and professional development. Here are excerpts from three teachers' reflective essays.

School-Based Program Development: Mary Cox, Martin Luther King Jr. High School

An assistant principal once told me, "There is nothing new in education. If you stay around long enough, it all resurfaces." This is certainly the way I felt that first evening I walked into the Writing Across the Curriculum class. I was not at all sure it was where I belonged. After all I had been dealing with writing as a process for years. What more could I learn, especially from teachers in other disciplines? Besides, I wasn't sure it was necessary that I know what other disciplines were doing about writing.

I was wrong.

Sharing class time with teachers in other disciplines was stimulating and inspirational. I learned that we all share a basic concern for student learning and achievement. More important, I learned there is a great deal of teaching going on in the Detroit Public Schools in all disciplines. The class turned out to be one of rewarding exchanges.

I should have known that of course. After all, the most interesting literature class I have taken was populated not just by English teachers but by a doctor, a chemist, a social worker—all who brought different interpretations to the readings in the class. Why wouldn't this be true for a class on writing?

Listening to the exchange of ideas between the science teacher and French teacher taught me that English teachers are not alone. All teachers realize that writing is an essential part of learning in any discipline. What is it about writing that makes it essential to all classes? The answer came from a science teacher: "Writing about something tells you how much you don't know about it."

Gradually, listening to this led to a change in my writing assignments. I still assign very structured papers, but I also discovered that having students write short, informal papers ("What I learned from the first

four chapters of *To Kill a Mockingbird*") teaches me things about their learning. I learn what important points students have missed and I learn which students are reading and which are not. I learn which students have the greatest understanding.

I learned this from a science teacher.

Although students have been writing in social studies and science classes, language arts or history teachers often do not know it. High schools are very departmentalized and the opportunity to share, to sit and talk about writing rarely occurs. I believe sharing ideas among teachers is important, and the ideal situation would be to create cross-discipline teams.

These cross-discipline teams could create writing to learn activities that offer the students and teachers many advantages. These activities could be used to allow students an opportunity to think through a lesson they had just covered. They could help students organize ideas about a subject or tackle new material. They would force students to make judgments about material that is new to them and, at the same time, give teachers insight into how well students are comprehending a lesson or how students feel about a method or technique used.

The inclusion of social studies and science papers in the ninth-grade students' portfolios is one way various disciplines could encourage writing. Although teachers would help to design the assignments, students would choose the papers representative of their best writing in each subject area. A combination of cross-discipline sharing and writing to learn activities will produce the best examples of a student's work.

The senior Research Writing class I teach especially lends itself to the exchange of ideas between disciplines. We are proposing a series of writing to learn activities designed to lead to a final project of the student's choice. I hope this approach will encourage students to exercise abilities that are in various areas of intelligence and interest.

It is time we turn our attention to individual needs. By allowing our students an opportunity to choose more varied assignments, we are not only encouraging them to learn more but to become better acquainted with the world outside the classroom. Combinations of teachers across disciplines create new strategies to guide students and make clear to them the importance of writing in all areas of study and careers.

This was the original plan, wasn't it?

Writing and Professional Development: Patricia Williams, Marshall Elementary School

Very timidly I approached the Composition 600 course—with little confidence in my ability to write or in the personal value of the course. It didn't improve when I met the other class participants: they were

teachers at either the middle or high school level. Somehow I ascribed qualities to them I had not accorded elementary school teachers, especially myself. As an elementary reading lab teacher, with no class of my own, it was definitely a challenge to motivate myself to continue in the course.

In the ensuing weeks I found myself surrounded by the kind of educational atmosphere I had often desired: the faculty provided the kind of positive support both helpful and sometimes *necessary* to keep us interested and motivated. All participants were there to *learn*, to share. Classroom surroundings became a kind of secure, comfortable arena that allowed me to overcome reluctance to write: I began to "blossom," if you will.

My inspiration to write came from all sources: the faculty, guest presenters, and classmates. Even syllabus readings were thought-provoking. Presentations by the participants varied. One science teacher dealt with a scientific experiment. Responses to his ideas in class were written creatively and quite humorously, giving us the experience of integrating our thinking with writing in another discipline.

Another presentation was more somber in mood, but richly rewarding. On a half sheet of paper, we were told to write about one problem in our lives we wished resolved. The "problems" were placed in a hat; each person pulled someone else's and had to write a solution; we read the problem and solution aloud and discussed them. As both the problem and the solution were read, class reactions ran a gamut of feelings depending upon the content. Some caused tension and release; others required nurturing support, warmth, compassion. You could *feel* it!

Depending on the content, participants cried quietly; became overwhelmed; or smiled contemplatively. No one remained untouched. This was a moving, worthy exercise—teaching much about the value of writing and instantly bringing the class closer together. We all know the power of the written word, but very often attribute that ability to move others to professional writers. Here were teachers writing with that same power, evoking strong feelings in listeners. Based on this experience, I began to believe children must learn to write with power; we must guide them.

These exercises (and others) helped me become more aware of my own feelings as I responded in writing. They also provided an avenue of exploration to discover activities I could invent and share with my fellow "classmates" as well as my school colleagues.

With the gentle, lively, warm, thought-provoking discussions, I began to open up to the writing process. It was the kind of support, that gentle nudging that says, "You can do it." It kept me trying. Being part of the class gave me a new perspective, a different appreciation and compassion for what some young children might go through

when given a writing assignment: utter anxiety and sheer anguish. And yet the climate created in *that* classroom led me to think how important it is to provide students with an "incubator," so that their "seedling" thoughts can take hold and develop.

I tested this belief in an experiment with Mr. Miller, the science teacher at my school. After agonizing over his willingness to cooperate, I finally asked him if he would ask one of his classes to write a summary or story about a lesson as a means of assessing what they understood and to give them exposure to writing in that discipline. To my surprise, he quickly accepted the idea and wanted to know if I would grade it. (Teachers always feel swamped with paperwork.) I offered to make comments on each student's paper: an acceptable compromise.

Mr. Miller was extremely pleased with the outcome: his students' writings were clear and orderly, and they felt cared about. Both he and I felt rewarded. His pride in his students and his work was evident! He fairly beamed as he pointed out excerpts, and developed plans to use a writing exercise after each unit. (Mr. Miller recognized that some of his students could verbalize about the subject but are not fluent writers—a sign that he cares.)

My success with Mr. Miller has encouraged me to motivate other teachers, to nudge them toward having their students write "across the curriculum." With my influence, writing processes might expand to creative writing assignments in disciplines.

A refreshing, positive comment sometimes transports students a lot farther along the educational spectrum. As educators, we become so accustomed to grading, we often forget all learning does not have to be labelled A through F. We must sometimes allow students to write unencumbered by "fear of a grade." We must provide a "safe haven" from harsh, negative criticism. Composition 600 and my experiences there demonstrate to me that teachers must be nurturers.

Classroom Initiatives: Constance Childress, Beaubien Middle School

As an instructor in the social studies department, I never considered writing to be among the essential skills and objectives to be mastered in my curriculum. Writing, I always believed, belonged to the English department. During this class, I began to change my mind. Then, an article assigned for our discussion titled "Multiple Intelligences Go to School," by Howard Gardner and Thomas Hatch (1989), provided a useful approach to expanding classroom learning: "each human being is capable of seven relatively independent forms of information processing, with individuals differing from one another in the specific profile of intelligence that they exhibit."

I found myself making an effort to incorporate writing into my

courses. I began by requiring students to imagine living in colonial America during 1775. Students wrote a business letter, convincing a proprietor to purchase farm produce, livestock, or personal wares from them rather than from another farmer. A picture of the product had to be drawn by students to accompany the letter. Students became interested in learning more about slavery, the triangular trade, and even religion.

One of my students (I will call him Frank) was a below-average student and had completed only a few of the assignments before this one. But Frank's business letter was full of energy, excitement, and much detail. I praised Frank, "I didn't know you could write this well." He replied, "Oh, I like writing; I write all the time at home." Somehow, I had helped Frank want to write in school, too. My students were motivated, and I could watch active participation increase with all students completing the assignment.

After having completed several similar, successful writing to learn activities with my students, I was ready to take that "One Giant Step for Mankind." I asked myself the following question: If I had the opportunity to develop a program for my students, what would its goals be? My answers were

1. I want to move students from being passive receivers of information to being active shakers and movers in their community.
2. I want to empower students to motivate and influence the behavior of parents, relatives, and friends to accept their civic responsibility and unite to form a community that supports a healthy democracy.
3. I believe school must provide an opportunity for students to have real purposes, and participate in the real world.

I created the social studies "Street Law" curriculum. This project turned out to be a collaborative effort between students and a special education social studies class taught by Ms. Carolyn Cleveland, who worked with me. I received a $1,500 grant from the Ponting Foundation through the help of Dr. Morris and Mr. Cooper to support this project.

Students start the project by sharing details about their neighbors. Comments are collected on the board for future reference. Then, an index of important vocabulary terms begins to develop on the bulletin board. A street map four feet wide (created by the students) of the Beaubien community also is displayed on a wall with student's individual maps. A color-code system is used to connect a student's individual map to the large wall map.

Each student surveys people living on their street. Students write narrative essays, describing their street map and the people surveyed.

Using the facts from their surveys, students write a narrative letter, describing positive and negative interactions between a survey participant and the law. Students share their final drafts with classmates. Using a computer, students create a data base of survey results. In cooperative learning groups of three, students write a collaborative essay, derived from one of the confrontations, in which they discuss pros and cons of the issues and offer solutions.

The following activities take place throughout the project:

- Students write creative stories, poems, and/or letters using terms from their vocabulary index.
- Various speakers are invited to address the class about the Beaubien community and the law.
- Students view videos about the Detroit community.
- Students select essays to be mailed to various city officials inviting them to class to discuss the topic presented.
- A writing to learn in-service for teachers encourages writing across the curriculum by talking about this project and future possibilities.

A classroom bulletin board titled "Beaubien Family on the Move" is created by the students. The board is divided into two sections, green light and red light. On the green-light side, students display pictures and essays about the positive aspects of their neighborhood, and on the red side, pictures and essays of issues and situations they would like discontinued.

The first edition of the "Beaubien Connection" will be published by team volunteer students from eighth-grade "Street Law" class, and from eighth- and ninth-grade special education students. Each class votes on selections for publication. To understand criminal, civil, and misdemeanor violations in our community, students take a field trip into the business community to survey various business proprietors. A computer game, "Simulation City," will allow students to design and build the utopic city of their dreams.

Current-events articles, pictures, and announcements about the Beaubien Community are posted on a bulletin board maintained by the students. Students visit the Better Business Bureau. A field trip to the Thirty-sixth District Court allows students to view actual civil or criminal court cases. Students conduct in class a mock trial of a criminal case with a lawyer from the community or graduate law student as the judge and with parents representing the jury.

Every student writes a personal commitment statement and obtains additional commitments from family, friends, and community. The commitment statements identify a community problem and solutions that the applicant actively campaigns to institute. Writing to learn

activities of this project are assembled by the students in a "Street Law/Urban Politics" portfolio.

Reflections on Reflections

A writing to learn course is more than just writing. The course demonstrated to us how valuable it is to bring teachers together in an environment where they can reconsider their own assumptions about teaching and can learn from and support one another. Moreover, not every teacher comes away with the same experience. In a climate of mutual support, teachers feel empowered to develop their own professional directions. As we see in the three end-of-term reflective papers, for example, each teacher describes a unique perspective on the meaning of teaching and learning. Mary Cox, the first of our writers, reminds us that change requires a leap of faith. Her initial reluctance to enroll in the course is understandable. She is busy and, as an experienced language arts teacher, had participated in the past in workshops to develop writing across the curriculum (WAC). She feared repeating the same subject matter. On the other hand, extended talking with teachers in other disciplines proved to be a unique experience for her, and strengthened her desire to experiment with using writing in her classes.

We were reminded that, as an educational movement, writing in the disciplines has existed in the literature for some time. Many schools, at all levels, developed curricular materials intended to support teacher initiatives; however, a missing ingredient appears to us to be time for teacher dialogues to develop working partnerships across disciplines. If dedicated teachers such as Mary are to be able to follow up on this important innovation with others, development of WAC must facilitate opportunities for teachers to meet regularly and gain an understanding of each other's teaching situations.

Patricia Williams, our second author, speaks about her sense of isolation from other teachers. She is an elementary school teacher who thought, prior to enrolling in the course, that she could not contribute to or participate in discussions about writing with teachers from other grade levels and fields. Gradually, through her own writing and listening to other teachers read aloud during the class, she established her own voice. Her confidence developed.

For example, in response to our assignment she approached Mr. Miller, a science teacher in her school, and discovered an ally where she thought none existed. In the end, they collaborated on designing an assignment and both of them responded to their student writers. The building of a creative teaching partnership is told about warmly, a sign that the school environment does not have to be a cold and unresponsive place. This positive experience tells Patricia that more

dialogue can occur in her school when teachers have opportunities to work together openly and creatively across classrooms and disciplines.

Our third teacher is Constance Childress, who came to understand how writing could further the goals of a social studies curriculum. She had always believed that writing was a one-dimensional skill taught by English teachers. After our discussion of implications of the Gardner and Hatch (1989) article, "Multiple Intelligences Go to School," Constance envisioned writing as one of many interrelated learning processes. Beginning with an assignment of a business letter that locates students directly in the life of colonial America and ending with the "Street Law" curriculum, she makes writing integral to her students' multiple ways of learning.

Unlike courses that culminate in a final exam toward which discussion and readings have been directed, our course primarily encouraged teachers to reconsider their own teaching situations in light of controversial readings and discussions, as well as practical writing to learn activities. According to this model, we do not simply emphasize different forms of writing in disciplines, although we recognize such distinctions; instead, we nurture teachers' various plans to include writing to learn in their regular school life. Although we certainly set parameters for the course by choosing readings and by designing particular assignments and activities, as a regular classroom practice we consistently elicited and validated teachers' daily experiences. Outsiders might not understand how important this sustained process of personal validation is. In contrast, teachers often spend an in-service day listening to an expert from outside their school setting present an educational idea and distribute materials related to it. According to this "transmission" model, teachers will assimilate new information quickly and use handouts effectively to make changes in classroom practice, as though transference of information and incorporation of methods could be automatic. According to our "dialogic" model, individual teachers have time to explore and adjust what can work in their classrooms. We believe that teachers asked to implement new writing to learn initiatives need to acquire methods in incremental steps and share efforts and advice with others.

Concluding Thoughts

During the past several years, national reports have referred to a growing population of at-risk students, those young people whose images of their futures are disconnected from their images of themselves as successful in school. Equally disturbing is the troubling phenomenon of at-risk teachers. Isolated from each other and frequently maligned in media characterizations of their performance, teachers have had very few opportunities to analyze, discuss, and shape their challenging

work. They face increasing pressure to respond to standardized test scores, which have little connection to motivating already alienated students to learn or to helping students relate schoolwork to their own lived circumstances.

Too often, teachers' professional development is limited to brief encounters with "experts" who know relatively little about the specific teaching situations of those gathered before them. Undoubtedly, some information can be more efficiently delivered in half-day or full-day sessions; on the other hand, regular dialogues about one's own teaching in a course setting that emphasizes cooperative learning offer a distinctly beneficial and self-reflective range of benefits: open discussions of current publications, trends, and theories; multiple, developmental planning sessions; individual teacher-presented reports and group critiques; extended investigations of new classroom strategies; and establishment of an analytic climate that supports continuing self-study. This is an experience Clifford Geertz (1980) describes as people being "free to shape their own work in terms of its necessities rather than received ideas as to what they ought or ought not be doing" (167).

As we discovered in the design and development of our semester-long graduate course, despite few models or resources for sustaining dialogue across school levels and across disciplines, our teachers, who received reasonable, adequate support for advanced, professional course work, steadily developed renewed creative energy that became translated into their own designs for interdisciplinary projects, funded proposals, and constructive, fresh approaches to difficult and persistent classroom problems. Similarly, in *Enquiring Teachers, Enquiring Learners*, the positive impact of cooperative teacher dialogues is described as a preparation for problem-solving classroom interactions because "teachers who have been taught to question and construct creative possible solutions will be empowered as professionals and will be able to facilitate such empowerment of children" (Fosnot 1989, 13). Indeed, in the proposal to institute our course, we had needed to find creative solutions to financial and logistical problems in order to make the course a reality: The Detroit Public Schools paid tuition of their teachers, while the University of Michigan provided a comfortable, convenient meeting room, current course materials, funds for several speakers, refreshments weekly, and supplied a university car for our round trips between Ann Arbor and Detroit during the semester.

In other words, our institutions overcame financial and bureaucratic obstacles; we all received official sanction and incentives to meet and work together. Despite differing schedules and commitments, the group's collective energy grew. Week after week, we learned how to learn from each other. Our interest was nourished by shared interests in our students and a developing knowledge base, greater than any one

of us alone could have provided. Certainly, we each arrived with private beliefs about writing and learning, and we had individual expectations about student learning in our classes. Week by week, we talked together about obstacles our students faced in our school settings and how we could help them succeed. We learned how and why differing teaching strategies met the needs of our students or failed to do so. In these exchanges, we always established teachers as central to evaluation of their own students' progress. In *Plain Talk about Learning and Writing Across the Curriculum*, Mary Ann Norcerino (1987) notes the centrality of teachers' classroom evaluations, planning, and flexibility to an eventual success rate with students. We, too, noted that each teacher's regular reflections on lesson outcomes became the key to an incentive to try something again:

> Evaluation is an ongoing process associated with activities and methods used by educators to know when and what students are learning and to reflect on that knowledge in order to make decisions about what to do on Monday morning. (160)

Evaluation and innovation, therefore, are not processes that can or should belong to people outside of our classrooms. They need to be an integral part of our teaching days, year in and year out. Therefore, our own evaluation of our teaching requires each of us to consider and discuss our own daily practices. Courses, such as the precollege/college collaborative course we have described here, dignify, inform, and sustain the energy of good teaching through an environment of creative collegiality. Moreover, our central pedagogical tool, writing to learn in disciplines, turned our collective attention to an effective common method of teaching and to students being recognized as writers who learn course concepts as they engage with them. In this regard, writing to learn speaks to time-honored classroom practices of learning by doing, during which learners regularly and individually engage with complex and challenging subject matter, regardless of discipline.

Finally, perhaps one of the strongest arguments for instituting cross-school collaboration through jointly sponsored courses is the opportunity it offers for teachers to experience education as a working continuum, not as a fragmented system in which their individual voices cannot be heard. We renewed our commitment to our students at all levels of their schooling. Indeed, we enriched our teaching selves through the establishment of an extended teacher-colleague community, confirming our shared professional goals.[2]

Notes

1. All teachers from Detroit who enrolled in the 1992 class we describe in this essay, and the schools represented, were Constance Childress, Carolyn Cleveland, Beaubien Middle School; Agnes Kimbrough, Lena Teagarden,

Mackenzie High School; Patricia Williams, Marshall Elementary; Lola Black, Cheryl Green, Dora Myers, Northwestern High School; Hattie Cason, Mary Cox, M. L. King High School; Janet Bobby, Redford High School, LanDonia Richardson, Knudsen Middle School; Edgar Griffey, Harlan Hosey, Rupinder Syal, Southwestern High School. The Composition 600 course has been taught once before, in winter term 1990, by Barbra Morris and Ele McKenna, both faculty from the University of Michigan English Composition Board. The first course resulted in production of a manual written by the Detroit teachers in the course for their colleagues in the Detroit Public School system: *Writing to Learn in Disciplines: Detroit Teachers Combine Research and Practice in Their Classrooms*. This manual was distributed to administrators and teachers who attended the April 20, 1991, Collaborative Conference held in Ann Arbor. The manual can be found in the ERIC system or can be requested from the English Composition Board (313 764–0429).

2. In January 1992, immediately after the completion of the course described in this essay, the Herbert and Elsa Ponting Foundation supported faculty enrolled in the course who developed and proposed grants for the 1992 winter or fall semesters. Morris and Cooper administered awards of nine grants to seven schools.

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