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Co-Teaching in the Dual-Credit Classroom: Collaboration for High School and College Teachers

Caroline Wilkinson

On the first day of class at University Academy Charter High School, I was worried to share teaching responsibilities with another educator. I had not experienced co-teaching before. In fact, when other educators were in my college classroom in the past, they were senior faculty who observed my teaching and asked students about the course. For those days, my class was planned for every minute and I performed with confidence and aptitude. Therefore, I connected another educator in the room with assessment and surveillance. Co-teaching is an entirely different experience because it involves a whole academic year working together, through the great classes and the not so great ones. After collaborating with my co-teacher, Ms. Sue Suarez, in teaching a dual-credit composition course, I recognized how energizing it is to work with another educator in such a collaborative way. I also recognize, however, how seldom collaboration between high school and college educators occurs. Institutional support for collaboration such as ours varies greatly, and in place of the daily dialogue Ms. Suarez and I designed, there are other techniques educators can use to effectively collaborate across levels of education.

Dual-credit courses are classes that high school students take and earn both high school and college credit upon completion. They offer high school students an opportunity to take a college course in fields of study such as composition, math, music appreciation, and psychology. The positive outcomes to dual credit are many. The National Center for Education Statistics states that dual-credit programs “enhance retention once students are in college” (“Dual Enrollment” 2005). In “Fuel for Success: Academic Momentum as a Mediator between Dual Enrollment and Educational Outcomes of Two Year Technical College Students,” Xueli Wang and co-authors found that participation in these programs related to students’ college completion or retention and better academic performance (165). Students and parents, as well as instructors and administrators, are interested in dual-credit courses because of the academic challenge and option for students to receive college credit before stepping on campus. However, as these courses increase throughout the United States, high schools and colleges struggle with how to best approach student learning, retention, collaboration, and preparation for “college-level writing.”

The limitations of acceleration in dual credit are complex. Although students who take dual-credit courses seem to be more likely to move on from high school to college and then to graduate from college, there have not been enough studies about student learning in dual-credit writing programs (Tinberg & Nadeau 2011). Other research demonstrates the tension between colleges and high schools as each stakeholder possessed differing purposes and contexts (Farris 2010). Unlike Advanced Placement (AP) courses, dual-credit courses are not directed by a national organization. Each university and high school in partnership decide on how the curriculum will be structured, who will teach the course, and whether the course will be located at a high school or on a college campus. After these essential decisions about dual-credit courses are made, many participating colleges and high schools do not tend to engage in dialogue with each other. This is troubling, not only for the students who would benefit from the input of multiple parties, but also for the teachers who could be collaborating.

In composition studies, research on collaboration tends to examine professors working together in

writing studies (Miller, Licastro, & Belli 2016; Alexander & Williams 2015) or between professors working together across academic disciplines (Henry & Baker 2015; Dinitz and Harrington 2014). In “Seeking New Worlds: The Study of Writing beyond Our Classrooms,” Bronwyn Williams criticizes the gap between college-level rhetoric and composition studies and other disciplines such as K-12 literacy studies. Williams demonstrates that even when scholars from different fields examine similar topics, they all too often cite only other publications in their discipline. In doing research in this manner, scholarly citations become exclusionary to other disciplines, even if they are promoting a similar kind of knowledge. This silo-effectiveness exists also in part because there is not enough discussion of pedagogy and curriculum between high schools and colleges. The need for more dialogue and more collaboration is visible when partnering in dual-credit courses.

The Option of Co-Teaching

In the 2015-2016 academic year, New Jersey City University (NJCU) and University Academy Charter High School (UACHS) in Jersey City, N.J., created a partnership through a dual-credit course so selected UACHS seniors could take an English Composition I course and earn credit for the class at both the high school and college levels. One of the specific local advantages we recognized was that when many of these first-generation college students began college the next year, they had experienced and received credit for one college class. Most dual-credit courses across the United States are taught either by a high school instructor who has earned a Master’s degree in the field of study or a certain number of graduate credit hours in the field, or by a college faculty member who comes in to the high school or teaches the course on campus. We decided to create the partnership between NJCU and UACHS differently. We chose to co-teach the class together—me, an Assistant Professor in English and Ms. Suarez, a high school teacher who taught Senior English. We were reaching for an effective way to provide students a chance to experience learning under a college professor, while also fulfilling the high school curriculum requirements for Senior English so students could additionally take the AP exam in Language and Composition. To match my schedule with my university teaching load, I would come in for three days of the week to co-teach the class with the high school educator. On the other two days, Ms. Suarez taught the class by herself.

To my surprise and delight, our collaboration over the dual-credit course not only proved effective for our students, but was also energizing and inspiring. Ms. Suarez and I began collaborating over the curriculum as a whole for this English Composition I class starting in the summer of 2015. We planned the four major assignments that students would complete throughout the year to fulfill college-level writing requirements and also to help them prepare for the AP exam. We created the syllabus and schedule for the course together. Ms. Suarez and I shared an overarching idea of how the class would be approached. This understanding was helpful because—as we realized once we were in the classroom—we were coming from two different cultures on writing.

Since this was my first time co-teaching, I had many worries, including that I would talk too much. Ms. Suarez and I decided from the beginning of the year that we would teach together every day. This collaboration meant we would not “take turns” teaching in segmented time blocks. Instead, she focused more on certain lessons, such as providing context on a specific author, and I focused more on certain other lessons, such as constructing an effective thesis statement. For each lesson, Ms. Suarez and I would each give our own perspectives on the subject at hand. We began our class in Fall 2015 with 20 students and quickly learned our pedagogical styles in relationship to one another.

Once we had taught together for a couple of months, we developed a rhythm. We knew when to talk more about a subject and when to listen to the other teacher. Rather than my worries coming true, I found that it was an inspiration to observe and participate with another educator in the classroom.

Fuller Understandings of Learning Strategies, College-Level Writing, and Partnerships

After collaborating through the academic year teaching the course, I found much to learn about

pedagogical strategies from Ms. Suarez. Like most professors with a doctorate in Rhetoric and Composition, my pedagogy background was limited. I took one graduate course on teaching college composition and then was put in the classroom to teach composition courses. Many composition graduate students and professors, including me, end up learning pedagogy strategies in workshops or in rushed anecdotal conversations with colleagues in the hallways. Ms. Suarez holds a Bachelor's degree in English Education, and thus, she employs learning strategies that I had not encountered in composition training. I learned a great deal about composition pedagogy from Ms. Suarez.

Student Learning Strategies

As a professor, I use a combination of a lecture, PowerPoint, group work, and class discussion. However, class discussion was a weakness in my classes. It was difficult for me to resist controlling the conversation or to avoid asserting authority. When co-teaching with Ms. Suarez, I found myself leading class discussion with greater ease. This shift occurred because Ms. Suarez and I were in dialogue already, therefore, students felt comfortable to participate in a discussion we were both engaged in already. Students offered insights on James Bamford's "The Most Wanted Man in the World" and about the life of Edward Snowden after he leaked classified information from the NSA. I came to see these discussions as authentic spaces where Ms. Suarez and I and our students interpreted texts and shared ideas with each other instead of spaces I needed command lest my students miss something important.

This change even transferred to the college classroom when I was a solo instructor. I became much more comfortable listening to my students during class discussion. I did not feel as though I had to control the room as I did previously and more students participated in discussion because the classroom became designed for that. This change occurred because my teaching style evolved in part because of what I learned about learning strategies from co-teaching.

Additionally, Ms. Suarez helped me to realize that I privileged visual learning in my lessons. There was not a lot of space for auditory or kinesthetic learning. Visual is privileged in college composition scholarship and therefore, my models had not taught me to recognize there were other kinds of learning. I had never learned about students' learning strategies or Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences until I co-taught with Ms. Suarez. I adjusted to include auditory learning more in my college composition classrooms and I even adapted my heavily lecture-based Grammar and Usage undergraduate English major course. I also experimented with kinesthetic learning by asking students to move during class into different kinds of groups, to walk to the front of the class and to write their thesis statements on the podium computer that was projected to the class. As a class, we revised thesis statements and students revised them on the computer simultaneously. This was a teaching strategy to combine the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic strategies.

Discussions of "College-level" Writing

By planning and teaching this course together, Ms. Suarez and I had many discussions on what "college-level" writing means. We assessed students' major assignments together. Grading together took us to texts by Patrick Sullivan and Howard Tinberg in *What Is "College-Level" Writing?* as well as Janet Alsup and Michael Bernard-Donals' "The Fantasy of the 'Seamless' Transition." I realized that, in many ways, we held similar conceptualizations of what college-level writing looked like. We both privileged thesis-driven arguments, understood that evidence needed to be employed to support an argument, and worked for clear organization and style in our students' writing. From these discussions, I found that college composition and secondary English education instructors are frequently coming to literacy from different places but arriving at similar places.

Ms. Suarez learned more about the usual genres in a composition classroom. These were helpful to her as a high school educator because most of her courses focused on literature. In our class, we

combined some literary texts, such as George Orwell's *1984*, Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," and Junot Diaz's *Drowned*, with assignments that focused on argument about societal structures, such as relations of power and gender and surveillance in modern society. As she prepares her high school students for college-level writing, she better understands what kinds of genres composition instructors often use.

Creating a Partnership

Co-teaching with another educator is full of possibilities. I had trepidation about collaboration in this arena, but I found that Ms. Suarez and I possessed similar teaching personas. I had worried when we began this collaboration there would be a "good cop"/ "bad cop" situation. We did not slip into that stereotype because we deliberately approached the students as a team. When students submitted their written assignments to us through Google Docs, they were asked to email both of us. When a student struggled, we both stayed after class to meet with them. We discussed the assignments, what students were doing well with the work and who needed more help, and we talked about our schedule for each week in weekly Thursday meetings after class during Ms. Suarez's planning period. Sometimes I had to miss a class because I had required meetings on the university campus. Ms. Suarez was always generous and understood. Since we approached the class as co-teachers, there was a real sense of trust between us.

Collaboration between High School and College Educators

This teaching experience models a successful partnership between a university and high school for dual-credit courses. In "The Need for Teacher Communities," Lorna Collier and Linda Darling-Hammond assert, "when teachers can collaborate with other teachers, they can better serve their students" (12). My experience co-teaching this course this past year demonstrates that this claim is not only true for college educators collaborating with other university professors and high school instructors collaborating with other high school teachers, but it is also true for college educators and high school teachers working together. Not every university and high school will provide the kind of institutional support for dual-credit co-teaching that Ms. Suarez and I enjoyed in the 2015-2016 academic year. When such support is lacking, there are other ways for college and high school educators to collaborate in English Education.

Teacher Symposium

A teaching symposium sponsored by a university and high school would be valuable—even if it only ran a single day. Fostering dialogue between teachers and professors about the kinds of work they are doing in the classroom would be key. A symposium would allow for 15 minute presentations similar to a conference setting and could offer spaces to learn from a variety of perspectives on literacy, composition, literature, and pedagogical strategies. Educators could have a chance to learn about others also studying the same kind of research. Collaborations, co-teaching, and action-oriented co-authorship could all begin from this symposium.

Reading Groups

Adding a requirement like a reading group or book club runs the risk of backfiring because teachers and professors are already overworked. A monthly reading group on relevant and brief pedagogical texts in English Education could make it so that university and high school instructors can interact with one another and begin to have sorely needed conversations on what "college-level" writing means and how to prepare students for college, careers, and life experiences.

National Writing Project

The National Writing Project is an essential resource for many English educators. The Summer Institute involves many secondary educators every year, but more college professors who teach composition, literature, and linguistics should participate. The National Writing Project is an established, respected setting where generative active discussions about teaching are already

occurring, so it is a natural setting for conversations about partnerships between high school and college educators.

Inspired

Through co-teaching with Ms. Suarez, I learned more about my own pedagogical strategies which inspired me to become a more effective educator. I wasn't just inspired to teach more effectively to the high school students in the dual-credit course, I was inspired to reach the university students in my composition and undergraduate English major classes. Models who inspire us are rarely a discussion topic among college professors. Perhaps if dialogue and collaboration were supported more often, fewer high school teachers and fewer college professors would burn out.

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