An Online Writing Partnership: Transforming Classroom Writing Instruction

Over my time [in school], there have been many attempts at trying to make my writing better. I've gone from having interns try to help me, to writing buddies, and it all doesn't work. Until now, my writing has been below average, but now with the Writing Partnership my writing has improved highly. I've gone from making C's to A's on papers just from having someone available to critique my writing and give me good feedback . . . . It has turned out to be one of the most successful writing builders I have ever had to do, and I enjoyed it a lot.

—D'Angelo, a ninth grader, on what the Online Writing Partnership meant to him

Most English teachers have probably encountered students like D'Angelo. Lively, good-natured, indeed quite charming, D'Angelo was a bit glib of speech and always happy to engage in classroom discussion on almost any topic. However, when it came to writing assignments, D'Angelo had been stubbornly reluctant, trying every means at his disposal to distract and manipulate his teacher into forgetting about that about-to-be-assigned essay. And when he finally did buckle down to the job, the result was quickly written, just as quickly handed in, and immediately forgotten. He had no experience with thoughtful revision, no proud polishing of a piece he had worked on through several drafts. How did the Online Writing Partnership change his mind about writing?

The four authors of this article—Jane, Allan, Jen, and Angie—have each at different times over a ten-year period helped develop versions of the Online Writing Partnership between future English teachers learning to teach writing and high school students learning to write better. We have also each taken a turn as instructors of secondary English writing. We know the challenges, frustrations, and satisfactions of helping young people find the engagement and discipline needed for working out articulate, written text—online and off. Over the last ten years, we have been creating the contexts, tasks, and strategies to enhance Jane's graduate course on methods of teaching language and composition, trying out new ideas, documenting the results, and revising our plans. We have been striving to help future English teachers learn how to help high school students stretch their capacities for written expression, and in doing so, we have been struck by how much these partnerships have also helped classroom teachers provide the individual attention that all developing writers need.

As Arthur N. Applebee and Judith A. Langer tell us, “even in English class, on average, students are not writing a great deal” (15). Drawing from a recent study “that included 260 English, math, social studies and science classrooms in 20 middle schools and high schools in five states (schools all chosen for their reputations for excellence in the teaching of writing),” researchers examined writing tasks and interviewed teachers (14). They found little writing, and what they did find was often simple one-right-answer kinds of responses or for-
Jane S. Townsend, Allan Nail, Jennifer Cheveallier, and Angela Browning

used a term, keynote, as part of her essay assignment. For this instructor, the thesis is a “one-part thesis statement” with a “keynote” repeated in the “topic sentences and other sections” of the essay. From the instructor’s description, it seems as if this “keynote” can and should be located in and throughout the paper. It is also related to, but apparently not equal to, the thesis statement. The instructor’s focus on this one technique for writing turned into a roadblock for Lynn who was unable to understand or even undertake what was to her an overwhelmingly complicated requirement. After completing the class, Lynn said, “And I’d really really really like to know what a keynote is. Never figured that out the entire class” (qtd. in Browning 100). Another instructor asked his students to write a dissuasive paper about the movie Fast Food Nation, or as one student stated, “we had to write a dissuasive essay on a bad movie” (qtd. in Browning 102). The student said she understood the movie, but she did not want to write about it. The topic, however, was a requirement. Ethel described her feelings about the assignment this way: “I understand it, but I didn’t like the whole Fast Food Nation. I don’t understand all that. I understand it, but I don’t want to write about it” (qtd. in Browning 102). Assigning a specific topic to write about, one that students are not interested in, is a constraint on which several students commented, asserting that their lack of interest in an assigned topic made the writing more difficult and “boring.”

How did it happen that these college instructors of writing seemed so well intentioned, hardworking, and at the same time so ineffective? How many other teachers of writing in classrooms across the country find themselves in the same plight?

Not Knowing How

For many years, Angie taught secondary English to students enrolled in our local community college’s high school dual enrollment program. One spring semester, she had a new student in her eleventh-grade class. It was obvious from the content of Lynn’s writing that she was a talented writer, but she was taking Angie’s class because she had failed the college’s first-year composition course. To explore why this capable student failed while students no more talented successfully completed the course, Angie decided to undertake a qualitative research study (Browning) and interview high school students enrolled in college composition about the usefulness of the feedback given to them on their writing assignments, their understanding of the tasks they completed, and what they believed they learned in the class. She also analyzed the assignments given to students, their instructors’ in-text feedback, and the evaluation at the end of their essays.

Angie found clear themes regarding the assignments. Students reported difficult and confusing instructions; limited, specific, and uninteresting topics; and difficult language used to provide feedback. For example, one of the instructors used a term, keynote, as part of her essay assignment. For this instructor, the thesis is a “one-part thesis statement” with a “keynote” repeated in the “topic sentences and other sections” of the essay. From the instructor’s description, it seems as if this “keynote” can and should be located in and throughout the paper. It is also related to, but apparently not equal to, the thesis statement. The instructor’s focus on this one technique for writing turned into a roadblock for Lynn who was unable to understand or even undertake what was to her an overwhelmingly complicated requirement. After completing the class, Lynn said, “And I’d really really really like to know what a keynote is. Never figured that out the entire class” (qtd. in Browning 100). Another instructor asked his students to write a dissuasive paper about the movie Fast Food Nation, or as one student stated, “we had to write a dissuasive essay on a bad movie” (qtd. in Browning 102). The student said she understood the movie, but she did not want to write about it. The topic, however, was a requirement. Ethel described her feelings about the assignment this way: “I understand it, but I didn’t like the whole Fast Food Nation. I don’t understand all that. I understand it, but I don’t want to write about it” (qtd. in Browning 102). Assigning a specific topic to write about, one that students are not interested in, is a constraint on which several students commented, asserting that their lack of interest in an assigned topic made the writing more difficult and “boring.”

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Angie analyzed a total of 26 submitted essays and 732 in-text comments by the writing instructors and identified several patterns across all of the essays. Feedback focused on the surface structure of language (580 of the 732 comments); positive comments were the most infrequent type of comment found in the graded papers (representing only 33 of
the 732 comments analyzed); and although many comments were made, they contained ambiguous and sometimes disheartening messages.

Further, students said they had difficulty connecting the comments made at the end of the text and on rubrics to the numerical grade they were given. For example, when viewing one student’s paper, the in-text comments, and the rubric, Angie noted 14 in-text comments identifying grammatical errors. However, on the rubric, the student was given a score of 8/10 for grammar and sentence structure. How did those 14 comments connect to the score of 8/10? Overall, it was difficult to see how students could get useful information from the in-text and summative evaluation that would help them improve their writing.

When Angie asked what they had learned about writing, students’ comments focused on surface features. Most often they stated something general they had “learned” about grammar. For example, one student mentioned learning about “commas” but was unable to be explicit and name any comma rules. All of the students’ reports mirrored their instructors’ focus on grammar in evaluating their essays.

Overall, the students in Angie’s study seemed more focused on acquiring college credit than on improving their writing. Worse perhaps, some reported a negative emotional response to writing because they found the classes and assignments so boring. Students who successfully completed the college writing course did seem to increase their confidence in writing, but they did not improve their writing abilities. Their instructors, despite well-intentioned efforts, did not teach writing effectively. They were overwhelmed by their workload, and many had a limited background in writing pedagogy, barriers affecting many teachers today. They viewed writing as an outcome or method of assessment rather than a recursive, creative, intellectual, and artistic activity (Claggett).

The results of Angie’s study dramatize the challenges that come with teaching writing, and many who do may not understand the tools required to be successful.

Learning How

In 1975 Dan Lortie coined the phrase apprenticeship of observation to describe the phenomenon of looking at the profession of teaching with a sense of expertise, based on experiences in the classroom as students. After twelve years or more of sitting in classrooms, many feel as though they have a high degree of proficiency on the subject of being in school. With this influence on our future graduate students in mind and faced with the challenge of planning an effective methods course on the teaching of writing, Allan and Jane began collaboratively revising a graduate course that was part of a one-year, professional, secondary English teacher preparation program at the university. Many of the students enrolled in the writing methods course had achieved a level of success in the skills they wanted to teach, having earned a bachelor’s degree in English or related field, and were looking for “recipes” to “deliver” those skills to their future students. Their models for writing instruction may well have been similar to the participant instructors in Angie’s study: well intentioned, hardworking, and in-
students never felt like they established a relationship with their eleventh-grade partners because the emails they sent back and forth were merely electronic curriers for papers to be read and given feedback. Perhaps more importantly, what interactions there were between the graduate students and their high school partners were frequently open to misinterpretation, sometimes leading to hurt feelings. Often these hurt feelings resulted from high school students ignoring the advice of their university partner, and the university partner in turn feeling as though his or her authority were not being respected as it should. Sometimes, testy exchanges would occur, and there was no shared history, no relationship between the partners with which to assuage these feelings.

In a subsequent iteration, we attempted to deal more head-on with the social aspect of student/teacher relationships. Drawing from our own observations as well as the comments from our students in the methods class, we could see great benefits to the partnership: authentic opportunities to assess a limited number of high school students’ writing and to work with them to improve that writing early on in the journey of learning how to teach.

To facilitate greater depths of relationship, we established an online community using Moodle, a free, open-source course management system that includes a variety of tools for distance education such as chat rooms, discussion boards, personal profiles, blogs, and wikis.

We began many years ago by establishing a partnership with Angie’s eleventh-grade English class in the local community college’s high school dual enrollment program. Initially, this was simply a brick and mortar, courier-like process in which Angie, by then a teaching assistant in the methods class, brought a collection of papers her students had written and assigned them to students in the writing methods course at the university. Our directions were simple: read the writing and comment on it in a helpful-to-the-writer-as-author way. Ask questions. Praise what’s good. Gently suggest improvements. These directions met with initial resistance—our graduate students really wanted to mark up and edit their partners’ writing and probably thought that was the job of a writing teacher. In contrast, we wanted our future teachers to engage with the eleventh-grade writers as readers, not as editors, and make suggestions helpful to revision. After a week of the graduate students presumably trying to do just that, Angie would bring the papers back to her high school students with the assignment to revise. Very low-tech.

And very slow. Because it could take upwards of a week to simply exchange the papers, and the whole process could take several weeks, the immediacy of interaction between partners was minimal. Our students did not see the process as authentic, and we sought ways to make it better. In a second iteration the next year, papers were exchanged via email, and the graduate students used the comment function of Microsoft Word to provide feedback to students. Papers were exchanged at a quicker rate, allowing for more exchanges to occur. Yet this process, too, raised concerns for our future teachers and for us (Nail and Townsend).

One of the concerns was the near total lack of social presence (Scott and Mouza). The graduate students never felt like they established a relationship with their eleventh-grade partners because the emails they sent back and forth were merely electronic curriers for papers to be read and given feedback. Perhaps more importantly, what interactions there were between the graduate students and their high school partners were frequently open to misinterpretation, sometimes leading to hurt feelings. Often these hurt feelings resulted from high school students ignoring the advice of their university partner, and the university partner in turn feeling as though his or her authority were not being respected as it should. Sometimes, testy exchanges would occur, and there was no shared history, no relationship between the partners with which to assuage these feelings.

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Perhaps the most radical change in this version of the partnership was the one that our methods students reported as most important. During this iteration, we instituted opportunities for the methods students to enter the high school classroom of their partners and work with them on their writing. In
addition to getting to know their student partners through online chatting and forum discussions, the future teachers were able to meet the students they were helping, face to face, in a regularly scheduled writing workshop (Calkins; Graves).

A Classroom Teacher’s Perspective

Jen has a unique perspective on the Online Writing Partnership because she participated in it in two roles. First, she was a graduate student supervised by Allan and Jane, learning to teach writing to high school writers. Now, she is a classroom teacher in a different school developing new iterations of the partnership in her own high school classes. Each year, the Online Writing Partnership has evolved to be more responsive to writing students’ needs, more collaborative with the graduate students and university faculty, and more useful to her classroom teaching.

Jen works with 120 teens whose writing achievement in ninth-grade English is varied. In any one class, she has a range of high- and low-achieving students, and on any given assignment, students will interact with peers of various strengths and weaknesses. Because the classroom represents a set of diverse learners, it is difficult for a single teacher to comprehend fully the scope and intricate nuances of individual students’ learning styles or writing processes. One such student was D’Angelo, whom we met at the beginning of this article and whose recalcitrance about writing before the partnership probably had a long history. The Online Writing Partnership binds the class together to address its diversity because it provides individuated writing feedback and revision opportunities for every student. As the classroom teacher, Jen sets up the logistics of the partnership, but once the course begins, it runs itself, leaving her with a near-unheard-of opportunity in teaching: time to pinpoint struggling students, time to hold mini-conferences with writers, time to plan targeted minilessons on issues that arise in students’ writing, and time to enjoy watching budding writers like D’Angelo develop their skills.

The process to design the Online Writing Partnership always starts similarly. We begin with numbers and dates. Important numbers are the number of students enrolled in the university’s writing course, which determines the number of partners each graduate student will have, and the number of writing assignments and revisions we want to assign. Last year, students wrote a self-selected introductory narrative (which was not revised), a narrative autobiography built from a brainstormed list of each student’s personal experiences, and a persuasive letter, also from a self-selected topic, and three revisions each for the latter two. Dates are important because we must align a public-school calendar with a university calendar. We plan backwards; that is, we determine our due dates and then develop assignments and lessons around them. We input all this information into our online course management system.

When each revisable draft is posted to the website, it is posted as a Microsoft Word document. The graduate students read it, insert their comments using the comment feature, and re-post the drafts. Because all the student papers are housed in an online forum, they are public to the students. Organizing online writing instruction helps build trust in the revision process, allows students to see the progress of their peers, and gives students an additional layering of purpose and audience in completing their writing assignments (Claggett).

An integral element to the partnership is relationship building between high school students and their graduate writing partners. Introductions among the partners first occur in the “Meet and Greet Forum,” where students write introductory narratives and letters to one another. Students also develop profiles, including photographs and short biographies, to give the course a “social network” feel. Additionally, last year, graduate students visited the ninth-grade English class at least twice, participating in writing workshops organized in groups so that they could work face to face with their partners.

In the writing workshops the future teachers develop and lead minilessons with their partners in small groups. It is a challenge for these preservice teachers to develop a lesson to meet the needs of five to ten different writers; however, it is great practice for the real-world scenario of teaching writing to more than 100 students. Preservice teachers are encouraged to look for patterns of weakness or strength among their partners’ papers as the focus for the workshop. The important function of the writing workshop, besides face-to-face relation-
ship building, is immediate usefulness to the high school students’ writing development.

In the spirit of evolving the Online Writing Partnership, we added “Feedback Quizzes” last year. The purpose of these quizzes was to make the partnership truly collaborative; that is, we wanted not only to offer the high school students feedback on their writing, but we also wanted the graduate students to receive feedback on their mentoring from the high school students. Students assessed the preservice teachers by responding to a series of prompts, including the following:

- What was most helpful about your writing partner’s feedback?
- Please retype a specific helpful comment.
- What advice do you have for your writing partner as a future teacher?

Figure 1 illustrates the responsibilities of each party within the partnership.

Graduate students were privy to all their partners’ answers and had the opportunity to respond. This open line of communication offered preservice teachers insight on how best to help their partners and, in turn, their future students. However, there were unforeseen challenges presented by the feedback quizzes. For example, one of the questions on the feedback quiz was, “What was least helpful about your writing partner’s feedback? Be nice.” The preservice teachers had been instructed to offer positive feedback on students’ writing when they wrote well. Yet, these positive comments were often what students would report as being “unhelpful” to their writing! Because we developed the feedback method as a “quiz,” and it was an assignment to complete for Jen’s class, students may have felt compelled to answer every question to receive credit, finding something to input even if no “unhelpful” comment had been made.

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**FIGURE 1. Participants’ Responsibilities in the Online Writing Partnership**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School Student Work</th>
<th>Preservice Teacher Work</th>
<th>Teacher Educator Work</th>
<th>Classroom Teacher Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductory essay—we followed the style of Sandra Cisneros’s “My Name” from House on Mango Street</td>
<td>Response to “My Name” essay and introductory letter</td>
<td>Assign readings</td>
<td>Organization and scheduling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Writing: • Personal narrative • Persuasive letter</td>
<td>Original Writing: • Personal narrative • Persuasive letter</td>
<td>In-class lessons: revision strategies, how to respond helpfully to student writing</td>
<td>In-class lessons: brainstorming, prewriting, organization, diction, elements of genre, voice, revision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revision—two working drafts and one final draft</td>
<td>Formative assessment of each draft of student work (comments feature of Word)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formative assessment of writing partners’ feedback (Feedback Quizzes)</td>
<td>Read feedback quizzes for formative guidance on writing instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in two face-to-face Writing Workshops</td>
<td>Participation in two face-to-face Writing Workshops • Classroom teacher designs activity for first WW • Preservice teachers design activity for second WW</td>
<td>Summative assessment of preservice teachers</td>
<td>Summative assessment of high school students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online communication</td>
<td>Online communication</td>
<td>Online monitoring</td>
<td>Online monitoring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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3. Substantive feedback to early drafts of writing includes questions, praise, and tentative suggestions for improvement.

4. Most critical are multiple opportunities for deep revision in response to clear feedback by interested and attentive readers.

For all of us, the most exciting component of the Online Writing Partnership has been the opportunity to learn over time about writing instruction and development, to understand the processes and participants more deeply. Each year, we learn more about students’ writing interests and capacities, including their significant writing and revision processes, distinct for each of us. We continue to work at expanding everyone’s sense of purpose and audience. All participants play different roles and have different responsibilities, and we can imagine other kinds of partnerships that may offer similar benefits to classroom teachers (seniors helping sophomores, ninth graders mentoring nine-year-olds). Perhaps most important, we are—students and teachers together—contributing to a process that makes all of us better.

Note
1. “Reviewing Student Papers Electronically,” published in English Journal in May 2011 by Spencer Dunford, offers a clear, concise tutorial on how this type of electronic feedback can be conducted.

Works Cited

Also, while we know that positive feedback helps writers understand what they do well so they can keep doing it, we think it’s possible that these developing writers perceived praise as unnecessary to writing instruction. Perhaps in these students’ past experiences, positive feedback was not part of that process, so it felt strange to read about something good on a paper they had written. Because the Online Writing Partnership is a modifiable, evolving entity, we anticipate further revision. Next year we plan to make the feedback quizzes a place for genuine communication about writing instruction without the constraints of a “quiz” format.

Recommendations for Writing Instruction

We have learned a great deal about writing instruction in the years of developing and revising the Online Writing Partnership. We offer the following suggestions gleaned from our experiences along the way and with the idea that we will continue to reflect on this challenging aspect of teaching:

1. Most helpful for developing writers is a clear sense of purpose and audience.
2. Learning to choose and shape writing topics of personal interest is crucial for learning to write.
Jane S. Townsend, Allan Nail, Jennifer Cheveallier, and Angela Browning


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**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION**

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In this digital rethinking of “Traditional Weekly Writer’s Logs” from ReadWriteThink.org, students analyze example writers’ blog entries, then begin the habit of writing their own weekly entries, which focus on the writing that they have done over the past seven days. These reflective assignments ask students to think and communicate with peers about their progress on writing activities and to project how they will continue their work in the future.


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**Call for Proposals: CEL Annual Convention**

The Conference on English Leadership (CEL) fosters an intimate professional community dedicated to building the leadership capacity of literacy educators. A constituent group of the NCTE, CEL crafts an annual convention that features nationally renowned keynote speakers and engaging breakout sessions. These informative sessions are presented by literacy leaders who are department chairs, curriculum coordinators, building administrators, college professors, and early career and veteran teachers.

The 2013 convention theme is “Transformative Literacy Leadership and Learning”; the conference will be held November 24–26, 2013, in Boston, Massachusetts. Throughout the three-day convention, sessions will focus on ways educators adapt their leadership and their instruction to meet the changing needs of students, teachers, and communities. CEL invites literacy educators at the elementary, secondary, and higher education levels to submit a proposal for consideration.

Send completed proposals to Heather Rocco, CEL Program Chair 2013, by April 1, 2013. Proposals may be submitted via two options:

1. Share as a Google doc with CELConvention2013@gmail.com.
2. E-mail as a Word attachment to CELConvention2013@gmail.com.

If you have any questions, please e-mail Heather Rocco at hrocco73@gmail.com.