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Ellen Scheible

Bridgewater State University, escheible@bridgew.edu

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Collaborative Writing for Publication in Undergraduate Literature Seminars

Ellen Scheible

In their 1990 article “Rhetoric in a New Key: Women and Collaboration,” Andrea A. Lunsford and Lisa Ede describe collaborative writing as “a new rhetoric” that marks “a site of struggle, a site we see also as one of opportunity” (234). In this early piece, Lunsford and Ede chronicle their time exploring the status of collaborative writing in the university and the academy. Not surprisingly, their project leads them “to situate the issue of collaborative writing in a much broader historical, political, and ideological context and to contemplate the ways in which our society locates power, authority, authenticity, and property in an autonomous masculine self” (234). Lunsford and Ede’s reference to the “autonomous masculine self” is also a coded way of describing the power dynamic that influences readers of tenure portfolios or book manuscripts and produces the voices in literary studies that decide an academic’s fate, often tainting the view of an editor who is considering a collaboratively-produced piece of writing for publication. While it has been roughly 30 years since Lunsford and Ede’s article emerged and their now mainstream, canonical work on collaborative writing began, the status of collaborative research and writing production in the Humanities, particularly in English departments and literature classrooms, is still uncertain. The silo effect of literary writing often takes precedence over more communal acts as faculty work to accomplish their research agendas and succeed within their fields. While still an assistant professor, I became interested in how the process of writing collaboratively could strengthen both the joy I get from writing in my discipline and the way I use that joy to teach my students the importance of writing and communication. This led me to consider collaborative writing as a pedagogical tool.

Alongside many of my colleagues in the field of literary studies, I have consistently been interested in why undergraduate research projects in the Humanities function differently from projects in almost every other discipline in the way that they value collaboration. Consequently, I put together a course on collaborative writing and publication in literature, which grew out of a workshop hosted by the office of Teaching and Learning at Bridgewater State University, where I teach in the English Department. At this workshop, I was asked to reflect on my role as a mentor for students in undergraduate research. I began thinking about my new course by asking rhetorically if it is even possible for Humanities faculty members, specifically those in literature, to collaborate with students on the writing of a critical essay with the goal of publication in a peer reviewed journal. I don’t mean to spoil the ending, but the answer is yes and no.

After hearing about my course, the Director of Undergraduate Research asked me to participate in a panel presentation during the annual faculty research symposium that occurs on my campus. The panel was focused specifically on collaboration within undergraduate research and included mentors from different disciplines, but I was the only Humanities faculty member in the room, let alone on the panel. Even though I eagerly agreed to be a panel presenter, I realized during my preparation for the presentation that I really had not figured out how to collaborate with students in a way that would lead to, first, an effective articulation of threshold concepts in critical literary writing and,

second, a real-life experience with the publication process, both of which were themes I volunteered to discuss on our panel. Further, I realized that the English department at my school, and most likely English departments at other state institutions like mine, continue to struggle with effective learning outcomes for our capstone courses. Thus, my presentation on the panel was more of an explanation of what we do *not* do as Humanities faculty members rather than an example of successful collaboration. After that panel discussion, it was clear that to figure out if writing and publishing with students in groups can really happen, I needed to create a capstone course where students could both articulate and emulate the creation and publication of a critical essay while collaborating with other students and a faculty member.

My approach in this new course that I titled “Writing and Literature” was to engage students as “partners,” a term that has recently emerged in the scholarship of teaching and learning to address the way we decentralize authority in the classroom and position students to see themselves as peers in the larger discourse of academic scholarship.¹ During the spring semester of 2016, I taught my course for the first and, as of now, the last time. It was a senior seminar focused on the collaborative production of a 20-page critical essay. Our senior seminars cap at 15 students, and my goal was to give each student the experience of writing an essay collaboratively with heavy peer review and a focused workshop experience. I also wanted students to see the end goal as publication in a peer-reviewed journal, which led me to assign Wendy Laura Belcher’s *Writing your Journal Article in 12 Weeks* as a text that would help pace our production. My in-class approach involved breaking the students into groups for the first part of the semester, and asking them to write an individual essay on one of three works of Irish fiction: a short story from James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, Paul Murray’s *Skippy Dies*, or Emma Donoghue’s *Room*. They then produced short collaborative essays that we brought together later in the semester into a larger essay on each literary text. I wanted each work of fiction to speak together under similar themes that could unite them in the final essays. Ideally, as an Irish studies scholar, I wanted to send the essays to an Irish studies journal, such as *New Hibernia Review* or the *Irish University Review*, and ask the editors to publish them together as a new take on scholarly writing titled something like “collaborating with students on critical publishing.”

During this process, I learned specific strategies that we, as faculty, can employ in such class experiences that are useful in developing and sustaining student/teacher partnerships in the Humanities. One strategy I employed was to model critical thinking, writing, and revision for our students in a hands-on way that students do not normally get to experience. We worked together through a published essay of mine so that I could emphasize my own revision process based on reader reviews and speak to how I built my argument, broke it down, and rebuilt it during the “revise and resubmit” phase of my submission. The goal was not necessarily for students to be able to write publishable essays as soon as they finished the course, but rather to be able to successfully articulate the components of healthy essay construction and, almost more importantly, to see revision as a type of collaboration. In an ideal world, collaborative writing would then be the foundation for the formation of firm writing skills with the idea that students might

1. See Cook-Sather et al.

see teambuilding and collaboration as fundamental to productive critical thinking and academic “silos” as less restrictive.

In terms of evaluation, I used oral interviews with students, self-assessment, and peer-assessment to evaluate student work, as well as a reflective essay about the process of essay creation. I also wanted the students to produce an exit portfolio of different versions of the essay that they turn in at the end of the semester—a process binder—where they can use the evaluation essay as a place to articulate what they “do” as English majors. Ideally, this would be the tangible version of a capstone experience. This worked well for the students as they reflected on their course experience at the end of the semester. They also wrote brief reader reviews of the secondary essays that then functioned as part of the literature review for the introduction of their collaborative essay.

There were definitely challenges along the way during this course. One major challenge was what seems to be an underlying bias against producing and publishing collaborative work, especially with students, in the field of literary studies. This is, of course, not new to faculty in the Humanities, especially those in writing studies who are familiar with Lundsford and Ede’s ongoing work in collaborative writing. As we all know, collaborating when writing in literary fields, as opposed to the fields of rhetoric and composition, is still highly unusual and not always respected. However, following Lundsford and Ede’s lead, the current methodology employed by most Teaching and Learning centers at universities, rather than discipline-specific fields, encourages more collaboration in the Humanities with the end goal of encouraging process-based thinking for both students and faculty. I decided to use my course as an experimental medium for ways that I might forge ahead with collaboration in my own work as a literary scholar while also paying attention to the moments when it simply does not work for our discipline.

Ultimately, it did not work for me to collaborate with the students as a peer writer. In many ways, this can be attributed to what Joanne Larson, Stephanie Webster, and Mindy Hopper refer to as my unavoidable role of “gatekeeper” in a literature classroom where there is a focus on specific content. In “Community Coauthoring: Whose Voice Remains?,” Larson, Webster, and Hopper found that the role of “gatekeeper” that many teachers are forced into by predesigned curriculum can “limit other participants’ access to powerful discourses” and perpetuate “inequality” (148). I had hoped that I could work as a member in each of their groups, offering writing assistance and contributing to the production of knowledge, but my knowledge and experience, as well as the power dynamic created by my role as professor, made that an impossibility. So, students worked together in their own groups while I offered feedback and support. In this way, I was not able to dismantle the unequal balance between teacher and learner during the semester in the way I had hoped. We were also challenged by the newness of the simple activity of partnering. Student partnerships become formulations of technology where pedagogy is exposed at its basic level, and this can feel uncomfortable and off balance at times. Managing that balance and recognizing that collaboration does not always result in equal amounts of production for every student created a new way of thinking for both me and the students. The greatest challenge we faced came at the end of the semester when we realized that the essays simply were not publishable. It was idealistic to imagine that we’d produce collaborative, publishable essays by undergraduate students in just a

semester, but I really did think it was possible (and still do). In the next configuration of this class I want to figure out how to reach that goal.

Through this experience I gained numerous insights about teaching, learning, education, collaboration, and partnership. I learned that I was correct: students better learned to write a successful critical essay when collaborating towards the goal of publication rather than only writing alone with the goal of a final grade. With enough motivation and time to revise departmental learning outcomes, this reflection could prove to be a solid foundation forward for revising capstone curriculum. I had hoped that writing with students across a semester might strengthen my own writing skills and increase my production of publishable work, but this did not happen for me. It did, however, happen for the students, some of whom continued to work on their essays towards the goal of publication. I definitely feel that I could move forward with a collaborative model for many of my future senior seminars. Inviting students to write together (instead of writing alone) helps to demystify the process of academic writing and encourages students to articulate what it is that they actually learn as literature majors in college. Student partnerships also push faculty members to think less didactically about our roles in classrooms and more from the perspective of problem or project-based learning, while also offering a sense of belonging (Cook-Sather 3-11).

Emphasizing student responsibility is fundamental if we want to decentralize the authority in the classroom in the way that Paulo Freire famously emphasizes in “The Banking Concept of Education,” an essay that underscores all aspects of my pedagogy:

The pursuit of full humanity . . . cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity, therefore it cannot unfold in the antagonistic relations between oppressors and oppressed. No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so. (85)

Partnering with students on even a basic level—asking what books should be read, what assignments need revision, how a student might construct a syllabus or submit a piece for publication—does not usually result in a complete class overhaul. Instead, students develop pride in their membership in the classroom community. At my own university, our first-generation students struggle fundamentally with building community in the classroom and building trust with their faculty leaders and peer reviewers. Student partnerships, both as models and as a direct experience, can help our students to build that trust in a more efficient and timely manner and to come together as community members in nontraditional but highly productive ways.

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