it was at a Writing Project meeting on the patio of a Mexican restaurant that a high school teacher colleague of mine complained she had no idea what college teachers expected of the students she teaches as seniors. “I feel disconnected from my college counterparts,” she said. “I know what college was like when I was there, but I’m not sure what a freshman today needs compared to what I needed 20 years ago. I have an idea based on what I see in print and hear from my former students at various (college and university) campuses but that isn’t nearly as helpful as sitting down with the actual people to hear it from them.” When I showed her the student papers in my briefcase, she said she wished she could show them to her students. I offered to email her some after I got permission from the student authors. “No,” she said, “well, maybe—I just wish they could see them with the comments and the grades (it was early in the term; 60s and 70s predominated).

There’s a high-school-to-college disconnect—at least in writing and probably in reading, and the Writing Project is our best chance to bridge the gap. Only 14% of the students who come to my college place directly into college level composition, with the obvious corollary that 86% don’t. Only 64% of those who place into freshman composition pass, and only 52% of those who place one level below that (the highest remedial class) are successful. Having taught high school for six years and college for the last nineteen, I have some ideas about how both segments operate, but increased collaboration across the segments is necessary if the students are going to make that transition, and the Writing Project provides multiple forums for collaboration.

The principal of a feeder high school was as shocked as I am by these numbers, so he hired Writing Project TCs to teach writing-across-the-curriculum to his whole faculty.

Not wanting to be perceived as a know-it-all college instructor, I asked the teachers to bring samples of student writing, examine it with department-based groups, and report to me their students’ strengths and what they thought their students need. The spokeswoman for the science department stood up when it was her turn and said, “What we need is a template, a way to tell the students exactly where the words go.” Heads across the whole library lobby nodded, “And spelling,” said someone from social science. “Their spelling is atrocious.” I took a deep breath. “We can explore a variety of structures for addressing different tasks—different purposes for different audiences,” I ventured evasively. More nodding heads.

Luckily, the presenters I conscripted were either high school teachers or, like me, had taught high school before. We decided to start with subject-matter vocabulary lessons which the high school teachers had identified in the needs assessment as a student weakness. The response was varied. A young mathematics teacher exploded in the first few minutes of the first breakout session. He had spent the last two weeks of his summer developing a series of lesson plans based on a new mandated text, and he didn’t have the time or the will to add anything more to his curriculum. The Writing Project presenter adroitly diffused his rage by asking him to bring one of his lesson plans to the next session. By the final session, Mr. Resister was bragging about how successful writing-to-learn was in his algebra class. In science and social studies, the teachers were receptive from the beginning. After vocabulary, the presenters began with reading and analysis techniques using the high school texts, and gave the teachers endless tools, no templates, but whole lessons they could try the next day. English was split; at first a couple of lead teachers decided not to attend because they already taught writing; they used the time to develop grammar units. Thanks to the “buzz” the project generated, first one, then eventually all of the English faculty began attending, and, by the end, I observed them enthusiastically doing a word-symbol-sentence exercise and sharing the new ideas from the Writing Project presenters that they’d tried in their classes. Sixteen teachers asked for an application for the Writing Project’s summer institute; a math teacher and an English teacher were invited. After the summer institute, one became part of the leadership team as an intern; she says she has “found a home” in the Writing Project.

I was the most fortunate person. As coordinator, I observed all the presentations. I’m using one of the reading comprehension techniques from the science guy (a paragraph mapping exercise: “What does it say? What does it do?”) in my freshman English class, and I participated in small groups with the people who teach my future students.

The most common comment from the high school teachers was that they found it valuable to spend time sharing ideas with their colleagues. Collaboration could have happened without the Writing Project, but the Writing Project with its culture of collaboration was the best vehicle to facilitate it.

This networking between segments will help us complement each other and what each environment allows each segment to do. I was complaining at the start of this particularly packed semester about my whopping 108 composition students when a high school teacher friend told me she has 185! To give students ample practice and feedback, I expect to respond to ten essays per student per semester which comes to about ten papers to read during each working day. If my high school colleague had the luxury of the same expectations, she’d have almost twice the number, and she has only a one-hour prep. So what do high school teachers do? Thanks to the Writing Project, I talk to more of them than many of my college colleagues do (plus, I had that job once), so I have some idea. Logically, high school teachers often focus on the five-paragraph essay, which is only problematic when the students believe this is the only structure for composition. Many of my Writing Project colleagues who teach high school and many other teachers who teach prepared students introduce a variety of organizational strategies—but many (most?) high school teachers whose students feed my college have
large classes, unprepared students with no outside support, and serious language and diction issues; so the five-paragraph essay is way to bring chaos to order; it’s a tidy, serviceable, manageable structure. Many of the remedial college classes have the same essay structure at their core. My high school teacher friend was relieved when I said it’s acceptable if they come to me with that, as long as they know there are next levels.

I was fortunate to attend the research conference in Santa Barbara in spring 2008, where I talked to several professors doing research on the high school-to-college transition. In researching why some students make the transition from high school writing to college writing without much fluster, University of Washington researchers I met coined two student types: “border crossers” and “border guards.” (Bawashi et al, 2008).

Border crossers willingly accept the new world of college as a next step and embrace the challenge. They are less afraid to fail. Jared, last semester, had been, by his own admission, a mediocre student in high school, but he accepted my position that there are more structures for an essay than five paragraphs composed of short, rapid sentences, and set out to emulate the models in class. The border guards, having mastered the five-paragraph essay and somehow harboring the illusion that it is the ultimate structure for any purpose, dig their heels in and argue, as Daniel did: “This is how I learned it in high school” (that is, “I do it well; I was praised lavishly and got As. If you were as marvelous as my beloved 12th-grade teacher, you’d recognize that I’ve already arrived at perfection and need no improvement or contradictory advice from you”). The difference between Jared’s writing and Daniel’s was minimal when they began freshman composition, but Jared, the border crosser, was willing to take risks and challenges—he tried moving the thesis around and incorporating stories and dialogue. He took responsibility for his own writing decisions, so he progressed with less pain.

This year, I have eleven students from the high school where we held the writing-across-the-curriculum workshops in three sections of freshman composition. Statistically, there are still only 14% of our incoming freshmen placing into college-level English this year, but I wonder if that school isn’t under-represented in that statistic. These eleven students are mostly writing passing papers from the beginning, and the one who isn’t soon will be.

As we learn new things or arrive at brilliant epiphanies, we ought to be able to discuss them with someone who cares. My musician husband is not always impressed with the minutia of my writing class observations, but my Writing Project study group is. Over the summer, we read Kathleen Gabriel’s Teaching Unprepared Students, and, as Gabriel suggests, I am beginning this semester with an “interview” of each of my regular freshman composition students. I ask about their writing history and techniques they’ve used in the past (I’m overjoyed when their high school English teacher was a Writing Project TC). I ask what other writing they’re expected to perform in their other classes and what writing they expect to do in their eventual field. We talk about some other things, but I ask if they are ready to try new structures and organizations, and they all promise they are. Perhaps I can program them to be “border crossers.”

Together in the study group, we developed assignments from the book to ease the transition; for example, an essay based on a learning styles “test” about what type of learners and writers they are and what type of writers they’d like to become. (Don’t tell my students I said this, but I’ve noticed they’re by and large pretty self-centered, and this exercise focuses on their selves; since, when we teach, we aim to be student-centered, focusing on students’ selves is utterly consistent). We test our lessons and each others’ lessons and then report back with the results. We share handouts and language for the syllabi.

Next semester, I am fortunate to be able to take a sabbatical to study the transition between high school and college writing. In a further inter-segmental collaboration, the researchers at University of Washington and Stanford implored me at that research conference to replicate their studies with the demographics of my student population, which is obviously different from theirs. The university researchers expressed frustration about how difficult it was to find high school teachers willing and able to cooperate. This is not a concern of mine; I will primarily visit my high school teacher contacts in the Writing Project and survey students in their high schools. I already have volunteers because understanding this problem and discussing possible approaches to bridge the gap benefits us all.

I’m running this article by my Writing Project writing group; my reaction to the feedback will be amplified because many of my colleagues in the group teach high school. They are all Writing Project fellows, so accordingly don’t rely on the five-paragraph essay, for example, but in the first draft they warned me not to be so ginger about offending high school teachers in the group because they won’t be offended; we trust each other. That trust is critical between the people who teach the same students at different levels. When we read what our colleagues at the different schools and different segments have written (and it’s amazing how diverse the various responses to the same prompt are), we see what’s weighing on each others’ minds, and we end up talking about writing and teaching. We benefit; our students benefit; our colleagues back at our own schools benefit from this Writing Project culture of collaboration.

Works Cited:

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