Books

reason why I recommend School's Out!

Throughout the text, the contributors caution readers to take care that they don't romanticize outside-school literacy simply because it exists beyond the cinderblock walls. Especially where the goal seems to be extending knowledge of what it means to be literate, and accommodating unofficial literacies so that people can grow in all aspects of literate capacity, it is unproductive to create new dichotomies to replace the old ones. Such a deliberate and reflective approach to expanding the boundaries of literacy learning is welcome and wise.

School's Out' culminates in Elyse Eidman-Aadahl's final chapter, in which she asks readers to contemplate the implications of our growing appreciation of beyond-school literacies: with whom and in the service of what agendas will literacy scholars and instructors collaborate? Eidman-Aadahl also calls upon literacy educators and other advocates for kids to adopt a wide and deep perspective so that when we engage with the issue of outside-school programs for kids, we can see the big picture and thus be conscious of whether we are looking at the proverbial tail or trunk of the creature that is literacy, and consider who else might be seeking to tame it as well. She provides a useful overview of recent initiatives to support outside-school literacy programs, the agendas that inform them, and their potentials and likely pitfalls. According to the author, we need to examine our purposes and our partnerships before we rush to programming decisions. We need to think about what we're doing and why when we promote the study or support of outside-school literacy activities and programs, and about their relationship to classroom discourse and objectives.

Perhaps the book's greatest contribution is that it is a solid addition to the growing body of research and theoretical inquiry into outside-school literacies and their relationship to both institutional and individual scholastic goals. Through it, Hull and Schultz hope to "signal the importance of building bridges between school, home, and community" (3). They, along with the other writers represented here, meet this goal and, in fact, surpass it to the degree that readers move beyond recognition and allow this insight to inform our practice and our partnerships.

Mone Hays is a Ph.D. student of language, literacy, and culture at the University of Iowa, where she teaches undergraduate courses in reading and public speaking.

(First Person)²: A Study of Co-Authoring in the Academy


What are the best parts of the National Writing Project summer institutes, those annual conclaves that bring together teachers of writing to our colleges and universities? If I were to create a David Letterman-style top ten list to answer this question, it might look like this:

10. conversations about reading, writing, and teaching
9. time to write and grow
8. participating in other people's personal and professional growth
7. talking about reading
6. reading
5. participating in demo workshops
4. learning from other teachers
3. building a support network during the institute
2. giving and getting feedback on writing
1. writing.

Seven of these ten features involve collaboration and conversation. So I was intrigued by the subtitle of Kami Day and Michele Eodice's book (First Person)²: A Study of Co-Authoring in the Academy. A discussion of coauthoring, I reasoned, would advance many ideas to help those of us looking for ways to encourage teachers and students to work and write together.

The premise of the book is attractive. Take ten highly successful and well-known (at least in academic circles) coauthoring teams, interview them, and glean from their experience what knowledge you can about collaborative writing. For those in the know about these things, here is a list of the paired authors: Blitz and Hurlbert; Bonnaci and Johnson; Grant and Hui; Kent and Oldman; Knight and Adams; O'Quinn and Besemer; Pike, Davis, and Ellison; Roen and Brown; Strickland and Strickland, and even Ede and Lunsford, two of my favorite scholars. Perusing the contents, I asked myself, "Why didn't I think of doing this first?"
But reading and rereading the book, I concluded that the text’s positive qualities are counterbalanced by some negatives I was not able to overlook.

To deal with the downside first, the authors, especially on my first reading of the text, seem to be chasing rabbits in an effort to circumvent anticipated criticism. They are aware that one of their major premises—that successful coauthoring is characteristically “feminine”—may raise eyebrows. They devote chapter 3 to a discussion of this assertion. The authors don’t reduce the term feminine to a dictionary definition. Rather, they take great pains to cover all the aspects of the term, contrasting masculine and feminine. They discuss the biological connotations of the two terms, unpacking feminine (nurturing) and masculine (competitive). The authors come at gender from all angles: considering hierarchical paradigms; analyzing the social construction of gender; explaining gender as a continuum; conceiving gender as space; and touching on gender politics. What it comes down to for the authors is that feminine is a way of describing an alternative to a competitive, hierarchical (masculine) way of viewing writing and the world.

I’m sure they have readers who hung on, and debated, every word of this chapter. But, speaking for myself, I doubt I would have read past chapter 3 if I had not been committed to write this review. The problem for me was not with their general argument, much of which seemed valid, but rather with their defensiveness—"our greatest detractors might criticize our claim..." (55) and their tendency to focus on the minutia of academic infighting:

...we are not looking for easy, discrete, unreflective ways of conveniently characterizing coauthors, the kind of essentializing that was brought to our attention by Beté London in her critique of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s well-known description of their work together. (54-55).

But as I did not want to disappoint my editors, I plunged ahead, finished the book, and then went back for a second reading. The second time around, I came to better understand the book’s structure. In the latter chapters, this irritating chapter 3 is put in context. The writers want us to know from early on that the material they present is going to be challenging and difficult.

Further, I came to understand their defensiveness. I will likely not be the only reader of this book troubled by the basic tenet that coauthoring is feminine. Drawing on the work of Gilbert and Gubar, Noddings, Bakhtin, and a plethora of other scholars, the authors argue that to be feminine is to be caring, compassionate, and nurturing. Therefore, writing that is caring, compassionate, and nurturing is feminine. And, because the coauthoring teams they interview are caring, compassionate, and nurturing, they are feminine. Day and Eodice don’t want their use of the term feminine to be seen as divisive or stereotypical, but rather they advance it as an alternative to the current paradigm. It seems to me that the argument is pushing matters beyond common sense.

In rhetoric and composition, we see ourselves as humanists, which means to me that we see ourselves as caring, compassionate, and nurturing—concerned with the humanity of those we study and those we teach. I have to ask why we need to muddy the waters with what Richard Weaver would call the God (or Devil) terms of feminism and masculinity. The coauthors whom Day and Eodice interviewed didn’t even bring up the concept of feminism until the authors introduced it. Once the idea was introduced, it was readily accepted. But, then, I can’t think of any composition teacher I know who would reject the notion that the teaching of writing should be caring, compassionate, and nurturing. Surely the NWP folks I know would agree that teaching writing and helping train teacher-leaders requires liberal doses of these qualities. It may just be my naive conservative self making itself known, but I have problems with classifying writing and writing processes—whether by one author or a group—as either masculine or feminine. What’s more, I wonder at the male reaction to this classification of coauthoring as feminine. Coauthoring as an alternative to a competitive, hierarchical education system I can buy; coauthoring as feminine is a harder sell.

Finally, I realize that although I may not be one of the authors’

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targeted readers, while I was reading, I wanted desperately to help the authors better organize what they had to say. Their text would have benefited from a few bullet points. But the authors apparently did not see the appropriateness of this kind of order. Instead, they ask a broad question: “How is coauthoring perceived in academe?” and then go into great detail about what each of the ten coauthoring teams had to say in answering it. The problem is that amidst all the talk, the reader is left searching for some useful generalizations. There may be conclusions here, but they are hard to find.

These difficulties aside, however, there is much about First Person that is interesting and insightful for the writing teacher. With a little work, I have been able to use their material and have created my own bullet points:

- Successful coauthoring springs from relationships based on trust, respect, and care.
- Successful coauthors tend to blur the relationship between professional collaboration and intimate friendship.
- Resistance to coauthoring is “often based on a deep-seated belief that individual rights of ownership will be corrupted or compromised, posing a threat to historical markers of authorship” (34).
- Participants in unsuccessful coauthoring relationships don’t like to talk about it.
- Composition researchers say they value collaboration, but they don’t write collaboratively or don’t value coauthored texts as much as single-authored texts.
- Men in their study came to coauthoring with this compassionate and nurturing stance that Day and Eodice call feminine; the men either learned this approach by experiencing the value of it or by experiencing the lack of it in their own scholarly pursuits.
- Collaborative writing doesn’t “necessarily obliterate individual voices” (82).
- The sum of the whole seems to be greater than the parts—at least in these successful coauthoring teams (together we’re more than we are separately).
- Talk seems to be vital to coauthoring in invention, prewriting, and revising.
- Successful coauthors can find it difficult to articulate why their partnership works and how it works.
- Writing is well-poised to help students become more compassionate and caring because it draws on feelings and experiences that writers have.
- A caring teacher who’s skillful in collaborative techniques can help students “begin to understand respect and trust and commitment, begin to see and appreciate others’ strengths, and begin to care whether their peers do well inside and outside of the class” (182).

For those of us in writing projects, these nuggets become a treasure of considerable value. They help explain why the summer institute is so valuable to teachers. The institutes foster an atmosphere of compassion and nurturing. Although we speak with one voice when we espouse the NWP philosophies, our individual voices are not obliterated. We blur the lines between professional contacts and intimate friendships only to find that both are strengthened. We share our experiences with others, hoping they will come to understand that they too need this (OK, I’ll use the word) feminine experience. And, finally, we take what we learn back to our classrooms and see growth as our students experience what we have experienced.

In the end, I’m drawn to the book and expect to use it, but probably not in ways that the authors intended. I’ll refine the nuggets and share them with summer institute participants and teacher-consultants. I may use them to help explain the success of the NWP to educators in our state who still, as startling as it may be, have never heard of the NWP or its activities.

For me the concepts in this book are more useful than the style in which they are presented. The teacher-consultants I work with can benefit from a serious consideration of the benefits and pitfalls of cooperation and collaboration in their work. But for the most part, they do not need to slog through complex discussions of feminine theory and the inexplicable inner workings of tenure committees. Still, I’m happy to have the book in our library as a resource and as a way to stretch the teachers who are ready for it.

Suzanne Cherry is director of the Swamp Fox Writing Project at Francis Marion University in Florence, South Carolina.