Making Thinking Visible: Encouraging Interaction Among School and University Writing Teachers

BY

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From 1988 to 1992, I served as the educational coordinator for a school/university collaborative in Pittsburgh called The Making Thinking Visible Project. Making Thinking Visible, housed at Carnegie Mellon’s Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy and funded by the Howard Heinz Endowment, was an attempt to redefine school and university collaborations, asking teachers as researchers to conduct their own classroom inquiries, to make discoveries, and to share and discuss their reflective practices with others. Project director Linda Flower, a team of CMU researchers, and I hoped that we might demonstrate a new way of successful interaction among high school and university writing teachers that would celebrate the differences in teachers, students, and the teaching of composition. More specifically, we wanted to see how teachers from very different classes and contexts would adapt a specific writing technique called collaborative planning into their teaching repertoires. The most meaningful way to explain how this project worked is to show you some of the issues, processes, and products of this collaborative effort.

Schools and universities have different cultures, beliefs, and agendas, and when university teachers who are also researchers initiate programs that encourage school and university writing teachers to work together, we have to recognize these differences. That does not mean that we do not or cannot understand each other, nor are they necessarily deterrents to the success of collaborative projects between schools and universities. On the contrary, when high school and college writing teachers engage in a project where they actually create their own projects, where they can share discoveries, and where their diverse cultures are recognized, discussed, and challenged, I think that all teachers involved can experience a new level of professional growth and awareness.

In 1988, the Center for the Study of Writing at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh established a partnership with the Pittsburgh Public Schools to study a writing technique called collaborative planning in high school and college classrooms. Collaborative planning is similar to peer conferencing, but rather than always discussing an already existing draft, students can use collaborative planning before they write, while they are drafting, or when they are revising a text. During collaborative planning the writer explains her plan to a supporter (or supporters) who listens, asks questions, and encourages the writer to develop and elaborate ideas for the paper. Often audio or video tapes of planning sessions are made and transcribed so that students and teachers can carefully examine and re-

NOTE: I would like to thank Linda Flower and Elenore Long at Carnegie Mellon University for their valuable assistance and collaboration, and I would like to thank all those project members mentioned for allowing me to share their ideas and discoveries.
Connections: Research and Practice

The Quarterly is pleased to feature Center research in a new series of articles we call "Connections: Research and Practice." "Connections" articles will bring you the latest findings of Center research and the implications of these findings to practitioners. The following piece by Linda Norris describes exciting research on collaboration called the "Making Thinking Visible" project, a project in Pittsburgh that forged new connections between university and secondary school faculty through writing.

The National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy is a federally funded research center housed at the Graduate School of Education at the University of California at Berkeley, with a site at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. As Norris's article illustrates, Center research aims for a strong classroom connection. Most Center projects involve students and teachers in classrooms. The Center is investigating topics as diverse as literacy development in the early years, oral and written language growth of non-English background students, portfolio evaluation, writing in the urban, multicultural classroom, and the literacy demands of the workplace, to name a few.

Upcoming articles will feature the Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh, the Center's urban teacher research project called M-CLASS, and the Center's portfolio project. We welcome additional manuscripts on related topics. For more information on the Center, including a list of Center publications and information on the Center's traveling workshop, write to: National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, 5513 Tolman Hall, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, or phone (510) 643-7022.

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sion of Freire’s “banking” concept of education. Pittsburgh’s Community Literacy Center posed an even greater challenge. Could collaborative planning help inner-city teenagers on the margins of school to get their voices heard on community issues such as the restructuring of Pittsburgh schools and drugs, or on such peer group issues as risk and respect? In addition, I wanted to see how a group of student teachers reacted to collaborative planning and if it would become part of their emerging repertoires for teaching high school English.

Could collaborative planning help inner-city teenagers on the margins of school to get their voices heard on community issues such as the restructuring of Pittsburgh schools and drugs, or on such peer group issues as risk and respect?

The initial assumptions, questions, and misgivings we had about this undertaking began to play out as we moved from doing collaborative planning as a project group to observing what was happening in our own classes. As it turned out, our first two years were devoted to having discussions and writing short newsletter articles and collaborative planning booklets. We came to recognize that the action of reflection, both spoken and written, was a most essential part of the making thinking visible process for our students and for ourselves. A key feature of this process was our steady stream of discovery memos, newsletters, and annual casebooks distributed to teachers and administrators as well as the ERIC Clearinghouse.

Andrea Martine questioned whether her inner city ninth graders would write more elaborate comparison papers if they had collaborative planning sessions and if they took notes on important points during their sessions. She decided to compare these notes with the papers they wrote to see if the planning notes helped with elaboration of details. She concluded that they did. Jim Vincent wondered if it would be worth his college business students’ class time to do some collaborative planning for their semester projects — brochures about Pittsburgh. Walking around the room, talking to and listening to his business writers, he observed how collaborative planning was prompting them to generate exciting activities, things that he felt they wouldn’t have included had they written their brochures without consulting one another. Leslie Evans, a high school writing teacher in an ex-steel town, wondered if her students would understand what text conventions meant and if they would even consider them useful in their planning; she listened to and later transcribed audio tapes where students were discussing specifically how they were going to organize papers on Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. She was able to point out to them parts of their conversations in which they made decisions about the textual conventions they would use to write their papers.

A large part of our motivation for inquiry, besides observing the collaborative planning that was going on in our classes, was the monthly two-hour seminar to which we each brought a piece of writing about using this process the month before. From the questions we asked and the notes we took in our earlier discussions, we came to each meeting with a brief one-to two-page written record of what we had learned from observation, or we came with more questions, or we came with new ideas on how we were going to use collaborative planning. We came to call these writings “discovery memos.” We photocopied and shared these with each other. They formed the basis for small and large group discussions, and they replaced the pressure of an “essay” or “research report” with an invitation to inquiry. As months went by, we were making new knowledge about our students’ planning and about the ways we were teaching writing. Other seminars were devoted to learning from fellow project members’ short presentations on topics they were studying: the various roles of the supporter, using a computer program for collaborative planning, working with student teachers, and teaching collaborative planning to marginal readers and writers or to urban teens planning a community conversation.

Many of us came to the monthly seminar with reflections we’d written about our own collaborative planning sessions with others in the project. Some of us used these reflections to plan and write papers for casebooks we published for ourselves and for other teachers. We wrote about how planning with another teacher-researcher from the group helped us to clarify or elaborate our ideas, or we wrote about whole new avenues that we would take or whole new approaches we would try after we hashed them out together. For example, in one of her reflections after a planning session with Linda Flower at the Center for the Study
of Writing, Jean Aston, a community college professor, described how the dynamics of collaboration—the listening, questioning, and explaining—led her to build a new "bridge" among her own ideas:

I came to the planning session with Linda frustrated and confused. She listened carefully to my description of the class, to the questions I was raising about what I was observing about the students' learning and the relationship to the students' behaviors in collaborative planning sessions and to my uncertainty about what and which research techniques to use to gather data. Throughout the session she raised questions and offered examples from her own research that acted in the planning session to help me to make new connections in my ideas and to make my questions more specific. Specifically, she helped me to bridge what I felt was a chasm between the issue from the fall class—the contrast between algorithmic and heuristic users of collaborative planning—and the issue this spring—the concepts of learning held by many of the students and the consequent problems students face in acting on the concepts and in trying to change them. In particular, one question she asked let me build the bridge: Do students have concepts for heuristic action in planning? ... The bridge has helped me reframe my paper to look at the concepts the students hold and possibly change about learning and the relationship to the roles they take in collaborative planning. Now in the paper, I will be looking at collaborative planning in the context of a learning environment as defined by both classroom and student. I found myself sensing links during the planning session, but I was able to understand and make better use of Linda's questions by listening to the tapes. Time to think and reflect was important to me.

Jean's session with Linda and her replaying of their audio tape allowed her to solidify an issue and a direction for her writing. In another vein, Rebecca Burnett's planning session with Leslie Evans, a high school English teacher, helped Rebecca, a college technical writing teacher, deal with two issues: one, that the co-authoring process that her students went through was as revealing to her as the documents they wrote; and two, that her discussion was failing to speak to a practitioner audience that might be interested in it:

Thinking about the session I had with Leslie reinforced the notion that I really must make the information I discuss in my discovery essay understandable and relevant to teachers. Leslie was good at gently reminding me that research is valuable by itself, but it does have other benefits our audience will find more interesting. In other words, our research should help us be better teachers so that our students learn more.

All photos accompanying this article show students from Andrea Martin's ninth-grade English class at Taylor Allderdice High School in Pittsburgh, PA.

From this collaboration, Rebecca developed a new plan for her paper that provided examples of students making the wrong rhetorical decisions, even though their decisions were based on logical reasons. Her paper not only traced their decision-making processes through their recorded planning sessions but also offers her inquiry more explicitly as a model for other business writing teachers:

Now here's where my teacher role kicks in. If I had depended only on the memo the students submitted (as we usually do), I would have missed an important opportunity to catch these students' errors and the nature of their errors. They were wrong, but they had not made thoughtless decisions; they had given their decisions a great deal of thought.
What allowed me to catch this was turning to their planning tapes and retrospective reactions. Not only does this information give me important points to teach, but it encourages me to reflect on the reasons students do what they do.

The kind of dynamic between teachers like Rebecca and Leslie or Jean and Linda is invaluable for both high school and college teachers as well as for their students. As the above discovery memo excerpts demonstrate, another perspective can both challenge and encourage, whether it comes from a university colleague helping another professor to pinpoint her research question by providing examples from her own research, or from a high school teacher reminding a college technical writing teacher that her research should also inform her practice. In this dynamic, collaboration and support went in both directions; high school and college teachers learned from the perspectives of each other’s discussions.

Some of us used our set of discovery memos as a guide for writing casebook papers; others conducted a more formal analysis of the data they collected. Jean Aston, for example, traced the development of her community college freshmen using questionnaires and oral interviews throughout the semester. Rebecca Burnett followed her business communications class on a proposal assignment where she discovered three different types of supporters: disengaged, engaged, and involved. Jane Zachary Gargaro, another member of our project, used the transcriptions of her high school students’ planning sessions to see if students’ planning comments influenced their final drafts. Her writing assignment, to compare novels by Anne Tyler and Richard Wright, asked students to experiment with a new strategy — the block method — for comparison. In the following planning session between Vani and Scott, Scott is thinking through what it would mean to try out this new text convention:

Vani: My question to myself, to you, I guess, is how do we compare? See, I’m used to doing comparisons where we take one point and they’re close, but you outweigh it for one specific reason in each, you know. You pick out a point, and then you do a series of these.

Scott: You’re undermining the block method.

Vani: All right, well anyway, I’m trying to find out how we can change, I mean how we can compare these points in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant that aren’t strong enough? I mean, I guess we have to find what the points are.

Scott: I think you do it in reverse order. I think you find the points in Dinner that are strong in terms of social, and then you just balance those against those of Black Boy, and then after you’ve made your comparison, then you state other reasons why you think Black Boy is superior to Dinner. You can’t start off with Black Boy because there really are no matching influences with Dinner. You need to start with Dinner and then go the other way.

In her classroom inquiry, Jane then looked at Scott’s text which reflected the decisions he made based on his discussion with Vani:

Which novel makes a more significant social statement? Black Boy or Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant?

If Cody Tull and Richard Wright had met on the street in an anonymous Southern town, Richard would have been expected to step aside, smiling falsely, while Cody continued on with a surly grin. I am not accusing Cody of prejudice; I am simply stating that is how society was in the period the books were set in. Black Boy, told as an autobiography by Richard Wright, does a better job of exposing this prejudice; in fact, a primary goal of the book seems to be social criticism. Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant is a novel about a family cut off
from society; victims, yes; instruments of harsh social commentary, no. Two comparable characters in terms of age, gender and rebellious nature are Cody and Richard; through their lives I state my case.

In Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, the character of Cody Tull is a victim of his family structure and his own slightly warped mentality. Cody is always concerned that his mother hates him (he gives her good reason) and that Pearl loves his brother Ezra more. Cody becomes bitter and rebellious, and Pearl cannot handle him except through her presentation of herself as a harsh, authoritarian figure. Never in the book is prejudice shown against anyone except Pearl (I think her job could have been better) and Josiah, who suffers from cruel children and Pearl.

But, in Black Boy Richard Wright has to claw himself out of his desperately poor family while being beaten down constantly by both whites and blacks. Richard goes through childhood with no more than one year of schooling at each new place his family moves. The system is unconcerned; however; nothing is expected of a poor black boy anyway. In fact, Richard’s beatings at the hands of the various family members were considered necessary to teach him his place in society. The more he challenged the white system, the more he would be hurt, and his parents knew that. As he goes into adulthood, he finds prejudice everywhere — on the street, on the job, in the library, etc.

A hypothetical meeting between Cody and Richard would be interesting. Would they fight the first day of school? Maybe, but only because both grew up with quite a lot of hate, not because of outright prejudice. Cody’s hate came from his imagined mistreatment by his family (notably Beck, Pearl, and Ezra), and Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant chronicled these family relationships. Richard Wright’s hate came from horrible prejudice, and out of his hate sprang Black Boy, a socially condemning novel. Black Boy wins by default; no novel I have yet read (except maybe Oliver Twist) could stay with it in terms of a powerful social statement. Only an autobiography gets that close to the hatred.

After Jane read Scott’s paper and transcribed his collaborative planning tape, she made her own reflections about Scott’s writing:

[T]his essay offers evidence that Scott is achieving greater autonomy as a writer. He is willing to take risks rather than follow the standard five-paragraph essay — introduction, development with three major points, conclusion — format. The collaborative planning session offers evidence that he is also able to support his choices of writing strategies in regard to this assignment.

Before the planning session, the students in the class had been presented with two means of comparing and contrasting. In the planning session excerpt presented here, Scott argues convincingly for what he terms the “block” (subject-by-subject) method as opposed to the point-by-point method, which Vani says she is used to. He points out that when one novel is the stronger choice overall, the writer should discuss the weaker of the two first and then move on to build his case in favor of the other novel. Note the part of the transcription which begins, “I think you do it in reverse order.” He effectively argues that the point-by-point method will not work in comparing/contrasting novels in which one makes a much stronger case in regard to the problem which the essay question presents. His essay does, in fact, follow the structure for which he argues, as evidenced by the text.

This collaborative planning session and text also offer evidence that students become autonomous as writers when they become their own supporters, i.e., begin to provide meaningful answers to ques-
tions which they pose for themselves in regard to the assignment.

Rather than demonstrating whether or not collaborative planning was the latest panacea for making writing good, the Making Thinking Visible Project offered teachers like Jane and Rebecca a method for teaching writing that used collaborative planning as a way of structuring and supporting composition and as a way for teachers to conduct classroom inquiry into student writers' planning and thinking processes. This collaborative planning project offered both students and teachers an opportunity to explore their own thinking and planning as they occurred in the writing process. As such, it supported not one but three kinds of classroom inquiry. One was the creation of new ideas when student writers like Scott and Vani, working as planners and supporters, develop plans for their texts. The second kind of inquiry happened when students like Scott became increasingly reflective about their own thinking and writing. Finally, the third kind of inquiry, illustrated by Jane above, was carried out by teachers as they made discoveries from their reflections about their students and themselves—discoveries concerning the types of thinking and writing that were happening in their classrooms.

What we learned together in the project helped us to grow professionally; we gained insights into our students' thinking as writers and into our practice as writing teachers. We all made discoveries in the genres that we found most suited us. For example, my own inquiry led to a discovery about how preservice teachers represent collaborative planning as a teaching technique and how their representations, in turn, lead them to decisions about whether they will adopt collaborative planning into their teaching repertoires or not. Through seven detailed case studies, I was able to trace their representations of this practice over time and see their decision-making processes. I adopted collaborative planning and a specific classroom inquiry to my own special interests just as the other members of the project did.

High school teachers came to Carnegie Mellon for seminars, but university project members also went to their schools. Rebecca Burnett, a graduate student at CMU with over twenty years of high school teaching experience, went to Len Donaldson's school on many occasions during the three years they were together in the project. Len, a social studies teacher, trusted and respected her experience and they shared a genuine interest in each other's work. She helped him with designing his project on critical thinking. Len reflected that an awareness of one another's environments is important:

Both college community and high school faculty lack awareness of the environment and mode of operation of the other. To make such cooperative projects effective, the nature of these environments and the nature of the needs of the respective partners must be articulated at the beginning. This worked effectively at Peabody, I believe, because Rebecca had a grasp of the daily grind of the high school teacher.

Rebecca and I both went to Peabody High School to assist two other teachers who were on the project. We visited every high school and college teacher who asked us to help them to model collaborative planning, make audio and video tapes, and talk with them about their students and their lessons and their writing. Sharing time at one another's locations seemed to make a difference in how interested and committed we became to the project.

Smaller groups of two to five of us, high school and college teachers with some shared interest in such topics as teacher training or marginal students, planned collaborative planning workshops for other teachers. During the summers, high school teachers came to Carnegie Mellon to edit the casebooks we wrote to inform ERIC about our discoveries. Further opportunities to speak and to write to other interested teachers also played an important motivating role for this successful school/university endeavor.

Marlene Bowen and Theresa Marshall, high school team teachers in the northwestern part of Pennsylvania, pointed out that intellectual and financial support are important. Marlene wrote:

For me the Making Thinking Visible Project ... has been a support system, a springboard for professional growth. As high school teachers, we operate under the fallacy that we share ideas and talk about our teaching frequently. Usually, the opposite is true.

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And her colleague Theresa echoed similar sentiments, offering the suggestions that we need to involve administrators more and to provide release time for teachers in projects like these:

The concept of college and high school teachers learning from each other was refreshing, dynamic, and challenging ... The project also documented its moments well — the built-in self-reflection was powerful too. Include administrative types who could support and/or build the programs within a district. Release teachers to participate.

Leslie Evans, who teaches seniors at Steel Valley High School, felt that an equal exchange between high school and university teachers was also an important consideration:

I felt we treated each other as equals; no one distributed his attention according to status or experience ... Everyone was supportive. The college strata did not dominate — even if they wanted to! I never felt a "them and us" attitude or discussion ... I found that the transcripts of [college] freshmen parallel the same content, thinking, and concern that my seniors reflected. I really thought the exchange was wonderful ... I will always consider the longer-term project participants wonderful acquaintances and professionals. I will miss them and the group interaction. They helped me stay fresh in the classroom.

Teachers in our project spoke from their diverse experiences with high school and college students from the inner city, from computer-rich suburban classes on the North, from the struggling ex-steel towns on Pittsburgh's South Side. They also spoke from experience with college freshmen and future teachers, with women going to community college while educating and nurturing their own children, with business students eager to engage the "real world," with teenagers coming to see themselves as thinkers, writing about teen pregnancy in a community literacy center. Across these differences was a central concern: what are we trying to do as thinkers and writers; and how can we help one another? Our project efforts during those four years reflect the diverse styles of writing and inquiry we shared with each other, from discovery memos, to dissertations, from curriculum development for the Pittsburgh Public Schools to staff talks and NCTE workshops.

Project members created a circle of observation and reflection; our differences led to some of our most provocative questions and discussions. Our shared yet independent inquiry let us collaborate across the boundaries that often separate high school and college, teachers and researchers, school and community.

Notes

For those who want to read these discoveries, the newsletters, project book, and casebooks are all ERIC documents. A complete book on the Making Thinking Visible Project is also available from NCTE. For more information, please write: Carnegie Mellon University C5WL, English Dept., Pittsburgh, PA 15213.


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