Transitioning Writers across the Composition Threshold: What We Can Learn from Dual Enrollment Partnerships

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Crossing the threshold from high school to college-level writing expectations constitutes a challenge for many students since secondary and post-secondary composition instructors often work under different constraints and are guided by different curricular philosophies. Dual enrollment classrooms provide a space where these differences can be delineated, discussed, respected, and perhaps even reconciled by instructors on both sides of the divide.

Dual Enrollment and the Composition Threshold

A century ago, the National Council for the Teachers of English was formed, in part, to empower high school educators against the top-down demands of university English programs (“Forum”; “NCTE’s History”). Today, the relationship between secondary and post-secondary English programs remains a complex one, most particularly, in the area of composition studies. Questions such as “What is College-Level Writing?” posed by Patrick Sullivan, Howard Tinberg, and Sheridan Blau as well as Kristine Hansen and Christine Farris’s query into the “business” of granting college credit to high school writers suggest the on-going conversation. Meanwhile, Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi’s research into the discursive resources high school students transfer into first-year college composition courses implies a lack of uniformity in writing instruction across secondary/post-secondary boundaries. However, as David Foster and David R. Russell point out, an inherent reciprocity exists between secondary and post-secondary writing instruction since, “students’ writing development plays an important—though often unacknowledged—role in the crucial transition from secondary school to university” (1). To borrow from Larry Weinstein, this transitional movement might be seen as an intellectual “threshold” which secondary students are challenged to cross as they enter into the demands of post-secondary education (xi).

Unfortunately, this threshold is not easily traversed, due, in part, to the uneven juncture where the paths of secondary and post-secondary writing expectations meet. In fact, to borrow the words of Foster and Russell, a “profound mismatch in expectations” exists among “teachers in secondary and in higher education” regarding “student writing and writing development” (42). To this point, according to Herb Budden, et al., “many college
composition faculty berate secondary school teachers, blaming them for college students’ inability to punctuate, to cite, to synthesize” (75). And, it is not uncommon to hear college composition instructors “complain that the students in their various first-year English classes [are] not ready for the course” (Blau 368) or “wonder whether high school English teachers are aware of their students’ incompetence in writing” (Mosley 59–60). In frustration, some college writing instructors find themselves “un-teaching” many elements of students’ high school writing instruction in order to “ready” students for the college writing experience.

At the same time, secondary English teachers such as Gregory Shafer resist the notion that he and his colleagues merely “reject the double negative, the first person narrative, [or] the contraction” (67) in their writing instruction. His comment delineates the “catch 22” of many high school teachers who face top-down pressure to rely on prescriptive pedagogies for instruction. According to Merrill Davies, “The often-berated five-paragraph essay is an attempt to teach students how to [organize material]” (“Whistling,” 33), and Ellen Andrews Knodt explains that many secondary teachers utilize the five-paragraph format because of its usefulness “for beginning writers who have little sense of organization” (148). Still, Jeanette Jordan and her colleagues in “Am I a Liar? The Angst of a High School English Teacher,” argue that secondary educators also “value nonformulaic writing and struggle to push [their] students beyond the very limiting five-paragraph structure that they find so comforting and familiar” (38). However, she wonders, “Am I doing a disservice to my low-level writers . . . if I throw out the scaffold that they are still trying to master?” (38). Secondary instructor Lesley Roessing also feels this squeeze and struggles with teaching “high school” concepts such as the five-paragraph essay while, at the same time, fostering her students’ ability to have voice, choice, and style in their writing (41)—in other words, traditional college-level writing requirements.

To further complicate matters, as Katherine Nolan of Project Alignment notes, “Colleges have rarely defined what students need to know and be able to do in order to be successful writers” (qtd. in Nagin 64). Consequently, countless former and current secondary English teachers such as Roger Shanley have faced the challenge of trying to make “their writing instruction serve as the natural segue from high school to . . . university writing programs” (14) in a climate where “college theory and high school practice differ greatly” (Mosley 60). Likewise, the students, themselves, are left to “negotiate between the resources of their previous writing expectations and the expectations of new academic contexts” (Reiff and Bawarshi 313).

Dual enrollment composition courses add yet another layer of complexity to the relationship between high school and college writing instruction. In the mid-1980s, a nationwide trend of dual enrollment—high school students attending college for both high school and college credit—came into existence with claims of providing, among other features, a mode of transition for students from the familiarity of secondary education to the
demands and challenges of the post-secondary environment (see McCarthy). Dual Enrollment, also known as Postsecondary Education Options (PSEO), dual credit, or concurrent enrollment grew exponentially in the 1990s, and according to researcher Hans Andrews, all fifty states currently have some form of dual enrollment opportunities for eligible high school students.

The most recent report (2005) on dual enrollment from the U.S. Department of Education puts participation at upwards of 800,000 or the equivalent of five percent of all high school students (National Center for Education Statistics). No complete data exists on the nationwide number of students dual enrolled in composition courses. However, for the purposes of this study, as of 2006, composition ranked as number one among Ohio’s “Top 15 Courses” for dual enrolled students with 2,571 participants—nearly 700 more than in psychology, which ranked number two (ODE, The Promise 22). It should be noted that these statistics only account for those students enrolled in public institutions; the number of students dual enrolled in composition courses at private institutions has not been captured. Finally, a cursory web glance at institutions nationwide suggests that many routinely offer first and even second-level composition courses to dual enrolled students—students poised to navigate the threshold from secondary to post-secondary writing expectations.

**A Space for Examining the Disconnect between High School and College Writing Expectations**

The dual enrollment composition classroom provides a unique space where students simultaneously experience both high school and college expectations. As a result, it is in this space that the tensions and inconsistencies between secondary and post-secondary writing instruction have the potential for becoming more clearly defined. Such has been my experience as I have segued professionally from high school English teacher to college writing instructor and director of a dual enrollment writing program. Thus, the findings that follow are the result of observations of, interviews with, and surveys completed by high school teachers, college instructors, and students participating in three distinct dual enrollment/dual credit options at The University of Findlay (in Ohio): 1) on the college campus in a traditional composition classroom setting; 2) on the high school campus (with a trained high school instructor); and 3) on the college campus in a classroom populated exclusively by high school students.

**Methodology**

From 2006–2007, I conducted an initial pilot study of the three University of Findlay (UF) dual enrollment settings. During that time, I observed three College Writing I classrooms (one at each setting), surveyed/interviewed seven teachers, surveyed seventeen students, and then personally interviewed fifteen of the seventeen students. From 2007-present, I have
maintained a follow-up study of the dual enrollment composition classroom. During this follow-up phase, I have surveyed and held formal biannual discussions/grading sessions with twenty-two UF concurrent enrollment composition instructors. These instructors have also shared a minimum of three representative student papers with me per year for individual calibration and discussion purposes.

In each setting of writing instruction, students follow the same general syllabus for UF's College Writing I course and are given the same writing assignments (narrative, analysis, and argument). Likewise, all students must submit a final portfolio for communal review upon completion of the course. All of the instructors, regardless of setting, have had experience teaching secondary and post-secondary writing. Unique to each situation are the obvious physical surroundings as well as who does the teaching and how. In the on-campus, self-contained classrooms, the instructor was (most often) a former high school teacher turned college instructor, while in the on-campus mixed population, the instructor has traditionally been either a faculty member or an adjunct. On the high school campus, the instructor is a high school English teacher, who has successfully completed UF's dual enrollment training course and continues to participate in UF's summer professional development opportunities for dual enrollment instructors. Similar to the diversification found among instructors in the program, the dual enrollment student population is diversified as well. While all students enrolled are high school junior or seniors (presumably in the 16–19 year-old age range), the majority of students taking dual enrollment composition classes on The University of Findlay's campus are rural or suburban students who live in close proximity to the university; those students participating in the high school setting are from urban areas or remote rural areas across the state of Ohio.

In terms of methodology, I employed Robert Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen's “constant comparative method” in order to collect and assess data from both the on-campus and off-campus sites (73). In addition, as noted earlier, I gathered the voices of students and their instructors through survey questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. Rosanna Hertz stresses the importance of authentic voice in research and also legitimizes the inclusion of my own voice in the research process. A similar approach can be seen in the work of Cindy Johanek, who cautions (auto)ethnographic researchers to “balance” abundant qualitative information with a quantitative approach, which includes the coding of data (124). Thus, the survey and interview data for this study were coded for analysis. Specifically, participants (both students and instructors) discussed and ranked elements of “good” writing in both the survey and interview portions of the study. For purposes of this study “good” writing was defined as that which moves beyond a formulaic structure (five-paragraph essay) and includes attention to style, audience, organization, development, thesis, and grammar. While this study was put into place before the publication of “High School Teaching and College
Expectations in Writing and Reading,” the elements of “good” writing used here mirror those found by Joseph Patterson and David Duer in their research: “Selecting a topic, formulating a thesis”; “Editing and proofreading”; “Developing logical arguments” and “Analyzing an issue or problem” (82).

With that said, it should be noted that this study was not carried out with the assumption that a single, clear-cut definition exists for “good” writing at either the high school-level or the college-level. What is “College-Level” Writing? Volumes 1 and 2, in particular, point to the complexity of that discussion. Still, as Howard Tinberg and Jean-Paul Nadeau argue, “To be effective, dual-enrollment programs require a clear understanding among all interested parties as to the core principles, practices, and outcomes for first-year college composition” (710). Even before that caveat was issued, this research went forward with, to borrow from Kristine Hansen, some “fairly safe generalization[s]” (10) that college-level writing should challenge and meet, in the words of Budden, et. al, “students’ diverse needs” through discussion “about ideas” that “generate theses about topics of interest that they then defend and support with specific details and concrete examples—skills that will be essential no matter where they attend college” (76). In addition, recent literature indicates that current college-level writing instruction privileges, among other elements, analysis, argument, voice, audience, and process (see Sullivan and Tinberg; Lujan; Davies; Harris; Lunsford; Schorn; Kearns; Alsup and Bernard-Donals; Yancey and Morrison; Reiff and Bawarshi). Finally, this study borrows the notion of Larry Weinstein that the threshold between high school and college writing expectations consists “of that which, at any age, leads from doing slavish or derivative thinking to doing real, engaged thinking of one’s own” (xi).

And while the intent of my research was to uncover inconsistencies between high school and college-level writing instruction in order to discern best practices for transitioning high school students across the composition threshold, I came to recognize that the most powerful element for moving students from point A to B as writers may lie not with the students themselves but with those who plan, oversee, and carry out dual enrollment composition instruction. In other words, transitioning writers across the composition threshold is not so much about what the students do as it is about what the instructors know or understand about composition practices on both sides of the divide. As Foster and Russell write, “if teachers, examiners, and policymakers on either side of the secondary/higher education divide do not talk to each other, directly and/or indirectly, about student writing and writing development, then the mismatch [in writing instruction] will continue” (42). Thus, while the initial pilot study (2006–2007) for this research focused primarily on students, the follow-up phase (2007-present) has sought to discern what dual enrollment instructors—especially high school instructors teaching college writing on the high school campus—have to offer in unearthing inconsistencies that exist between high school and college-level writing expectations.°
Differing Expectations

Specifically, three basic factors surfaced in this study as contributing to the inconsistencies between high school and college writing instruction. First is the sheer scope of material public school English teachers are challenged to cover in their classes—from vocabulary to grammar to literature to writing. In other words, composition is rarely taught in a stand-alone fashion in high schools as it is on college campuses. In fact, at a May 2012 meeting of the High School and Higher Education Northwest Ohio Regional Consortia for High School and Higher Education Curricular alignment, secondary English teachers noted that the majority of high school writing instruction is traditionally embedded in literature instruction. A second difference between secondary and post-secondary writing instruction is the state and national standards to which high school English teachers must adhere. As Merrill Davies notes, “the teaching of writing in high school, as compared to college, is permeated by the need to get ready for the standardized writing test” (“Making the Leap” 119). These standards, to be discussed in detail later, impact the nature and quality of high school writing instruction. The third basic factor separating high school and college level writing instruction is the paper-load/grading dilemma. Teaching upwards of one-hundred (or even one-hundred-fifty plus) students per day, every day, makes assigning and grading writing assignments a prohibitive venture for many high school teachers. These three factors suggest that, from the start, a dual enrolled student entering a college composition classroom is crossing the threshold into somewhat foreign territory—a place where writing alone is king, a place where the expectations for writing are not dictated by state or national mandates, and a place where the instructor’s time and energy are (presumably) focused on the needs of fewer students.

Although factors of content coverage, testing mandates, and the grading load have consistently dominated the conversations I have had with instructors in this study over the past six years, three additional factors (with complexities all their own) have also surfaced as we have worked collaboratively to better understand how “good” writing is defined at each level of instruction. The factors have elements that intertwine. However, for purposes of this discussion, I have organized them into the following overarching groups: “Reporting” and the Argumentative Thesis, Surface Writing and Deep Writing, and The Writing Process.

“Reporting” and the Argumentative Thesis

Dual enrollment students in this study expressed that college-level writing’s intense focus on “thesis” is one element that differentiates it from typical high school writing instruction. According to Jean, a student in this study, “I only had it [thesis] one time in high school,” and still another student, Kasey, shared that although she had learned about thesis statements in high school, “college was stronger on thesis and development.”
Kristie added that, in her experience, “High school focuses more on grammar and presentation [than thesis].” One dual enrollment instructor, Kim, also cites attention to thesis as one of the noticeable differences between secondary and post-secondary instruction. Furthermore, specific to this study, and that of others (see Yancey and Morrison) is the acknowledgement that high school writing instruction generally focuses on analyzing literature or reporting information rather than creating thesis-driven works meant to “join a conversation.” As a result, it was no surprise that many instructor participants pointed to “thesis” as the main disconnect between how they have approached the teaching of writing at high school versus college.

To put the issue of thesis into context, it is important to know that in Ohio, the tenth grade Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) writing requirements include composing narratives, responding to literature, writing letters, and crafting “a persuasive piece that states a clear position, includes relevant information and offers compelling evidence in the form of facts and details” (ODE Academic Content Standards 45–47). In addition, the final Ohio 12th grade Writing Process indicator requires that, prior to graduation, students exhibit the ability to compose persuasive pieces that “articulate a clear position” and display the development of “arguments” (124).

At first glance, the OGT benchmark and the 12th grade Writing Process indicator, which are both aligned with persuasive writing, seem to suggest the need for a “thesis-driven” stance in student writing, since each, respectively, calls for work that “states a clear position.” However, the benchmark does not delineate whose position that might be—that of the student? the teacher? the writer of the source(s) the student happens to be using? Furthermore, the lone high school grade-level indicator for thesis writing (tied to the OGT) requires students to demonstrate the ability to “Establish and develop a clear thesis statement for informational writing or a clear plan or outline for narrative writing” (107). In other words, these particular benchmarks/indicators may indeed suggest or even directly speak to the development of thesis. However, the type of thesis being described here is one that “reports” information rather than one that argues a position or strives to add something new to an on-going conversation. To apply the words of Kathleen McCormick, “[high school students] have been asked to write research reports, which are basically summaries, rather than researched essays—that is, carefully integrated arguments in which student writers enter into genuine conversation with a group of experts” (211). Thus, since secondary writers are often required to report information in their writing assignments or on state tests, such as the OGT, rather than research information or argue a position, the definition of “thesis” differs between high school and college writing instruction.

The structure expected of these types of writings—think five paragraph essay—also presents a conundrum for high school writing students and their instructors, since movement beyond writing formulas stands, among many...
university educators, as a benchmark of college-level writing conventions. “Success” via writing formulas has been dubbed a “mythrule,” and in the words of Kenneth Lindblom:

lead[s] to one thing: boring swatches of writing intended to do nothing other than result in a high score on a test of writing that tests nothing real about writing. But if people who assess the writing expect to see school-writing mythrules followed, not following them can have serious consequences for students. (105)

The statement of Sharon, another dual enrollment instructor in this study, corroborates Lindblom’s remarks. She notes that an emphasis on format is a distinctive element of high school writing instruction and explains that since a five-paragraph essay has typically allowed students to pass the 10th grade Ohio Graduation Test, it can be difficult, in her words, “to get [students] beyond that point. They have a hard time with that.”

In regard to formulaic structures, another instructor, Janet, explains, “At high school, they’re learning the essay form. At college, they’re using the essay form. They’re expected to think outside the box and do more with it”—an explanation not unlike the advice of The Writing Center at North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which challenges writers “to move beyond the five-paragraph themes” they “learned to write in high school and start writing essays that are more analytical and more flexible.” The instructors in this study note that they often see their dual enrollment students moving out of the five-paragraph-mindset, in the words of one participant, about “a month or so” into the College Writing I course when students “find they do have something to say.” Janet describes this move as a “natural progression” and admits that while some students never get past the five-paragraph essay format, others, in her words, “bleed out of it.” Reiff and Bawarshi might describe these students as “boundary crossers” who have broken down their prior knowledge “into useful strategies” and “repurpose[d]” it for a new context (314). Or perhaps it is at this point that students have experienced a shift in audience from writing for their teacher or faceless standardized test assessor to writing for a more specific group (Foster and Russell 15). Still another possibility is that students have begun to initially internalize the importance of finding and contributing their own voices to an on-going conversation (Budden et al. 91). Despite these conjectures, some students’ movement from the five-paragraph essay to more sophisticated writing forms remains difficult because, to them, the five paragraph essay marks the pinnacle of “good” writing; after all, it stands as the benchmark for standardized testing.16

Perhaps, at least for Ohio high school students, the new College and Career Ready (Common Core) State Standards, poised to replace the OGT, will provide stronger avenues for alignment of writing instruction, K-16. The Common Core will assess students on three writing types: Argument, Informational/Explanatory Writing, and Narrative Writing (Common Core
and its accompanying curriculum will challenge high school writers to grapple with a proportionately higher number of non-fiction texts than past curriculums which predominately focused on literature study (10). In the meantime, the current “report” versus “research” binary leads to the argument that, although high school and college-level writing instruction may each strive to equip students with the abilities to write strong essays—essays with thesis and structure—the goals behind these essays may be inherently different. As a result, student (and instructor) attempts to transition across the writing threshold may be tricky if not confounding and frustrating.

Surface Writing and Deep Writing

An application of Ellen Lavelle and Anthony J. Guarino’s theories on “surface” and “deep” writing also helps unpack the notion that differing goals impede students’ transition from high school to college-level writing expectations. Lavelle and Guarino state: “The emphasis on minimal involvement and sticking to the rules is suggestive of a surface approach [to writing]” (298). With that said, high school’s aforementioned report-like stance in thesis writing would, indeed, involve “minimal involvement” on the part of the student writer, since he or she would not have to risk the vulnerability of posing a new perspective to the on-going conversation regarding the topic being written about. Likewise, secondary writing instruction’s incorporation of writing “formulas” such as the five-paragraph theme—although necessary to meet state testing requirements—still smacks distinctively of “sticking to the rules.” Here’s the conundrum then: report writing needs to be informational and broad, and, in turn, informational, broad writing lends itself to reporting about a topic instead of grappling with the complexities or intricacies of an issue. In other words, surface writing lends itself to a re-inscription of its own elements. Now to be fair, report writing definitely has its place and its own usefulness, but this difference in alignment or expectations can result in quite a jolt for dual enrollment students who feel that the rules of writing have been changed when they enter the college composition classroom and are expected to analyze information rather than report on it.

For example, many times the students in this study individually recalled instances where they composed their high school essays “the night before” a due date and still would “get an ‘A.’” Given the linear nature of “report” writing, such an approach makes sense: gather the information, put it into essay form, proof-read, add a works cited page, and the assignment is complete. However, when student writers at the college level were asked to take an analytical and informed position on a topic many found their previous approach to writing inadequate. To apply the terminology of Reiff and Bawarshi, these students may have engaged in “low road transfer” practices (315) by “resort[ing] to well-worn paths—routinized inclinations and default uptakes” (331) that had served them well in the past despite the fact that their writing contexts had changed. One student noted, “Before [prior to
College Writing I], I’d write the whole paper in one night. Now I pre-write, plan, and think about what needs to go where . . . [I] slowly write more over a longer period.” Other student respondents in this study also noted that they could not expect similar success with the “night before” approach in their college composition classes.

Arguably, the students’ “night before” writing approach failed because the students were encountering expectations of a different outcome; simply “reporting” information would no longer suffice. Said another way, to borrow again from Reiff and Bawarshi, perhaps students’ “incomes, or the ‘discursive resources’ that students bring with them” (313) to college writing were mismatched to the expectations of the assignment, even though some students did not perceive the dissimilarity. Joseph M. Williams and Lawrence McEnerney argue that one of the reasons high school students often struggle with the transition from secondary to post-secondary writing instruction is that university instructors are often asking students not just to write “something better, but something different.” This may explain why, one student, Andrea, describes college writing as “a lot more involved” and states that she “needed more preparation” in order to achieve “a decent grade.” She adds, “With high school writing, I could get away with a lot more.”

Another student, Shelley, calls college writing “time consuming” and claims she had “second thoughts at first” about the course. She states, “I wasn’t sure I could get to that level of writing . . . [In the past], I was lackadaisical, never proof-read—just threw them [essays] together and hoped for the best. I got away with a lot then.” Tonya also notes time and effort as factors as new elements in her college writing experience: “It [College Writing I] takes a lot of time and hard work . . . you can’t do half the work, you have to go all the way. It’s a lot harder but a lot more beneficial.” Shelley adds that she and the other students “found out how mediocre our writing really was [before taking the course]!”

The instructors in this study also witnessed the students’ struggle to transition from “surface” writing to “deep” writing in the College Writing I course. As Kay explains, students “had to step back and evaluate how much of themselves they were going to put into this [class].” Kay also notes that the transition from surface to deep writing can be especially difficult for some students who have been labeled “great writers” by their former teachers. She states, “They [the former ‘great writers’] want to write a big paper, but they don’t want to read the articles or follow the examples from the book. They just want to write.” According to Kay (and others in the study), these “great writers” have often earned their labels largely in part to writing formulaic essays that are grammatically clean rather than essays that display a clear focus and well developed, complex arguments. She describes the result as a kind of “smoke and mirrors with no substance that other teachers have bought into.” The words of Amanda Winalski, in her essay, “Bam,” further explicate this point: “During high school, I operated under the assumption that what I wrote was much less important than how I wrote . . . I realized
that teachers concentrated so intensely on revising dangling modifiers and comma splices that they tended to ignore the actual ideas embodied in the essay” (303). The struggle of this study’s “great writers” echoes findings from a longitudinal study at Harvard, which suggests “that those student writers who identify themselves as experts early on tend to develop less as writers in the long term than those who are willing to accept a temporary novice status” (Reiff and Bawarshi 313).

Thus, while students in this study were awarded for and accustomed to a routine of formulaic reporting and editing for surface errors, these strategies stand in sharp contrast to the “reflective-revision” skills necessary for the “deep writing” they were being asked to do at the college level. Lavelle and Guarino argue that reflective-revision “is viewed as a tool for creating meaning and exploring ideas rather than for just telling what is known” (298). And Reiff and Bawarshi might describe reflective revision as a “high-road transfer” skill, which “requires metacognition—an ability to reflect on one’s cognitive processes—as well as the related ability to see connections between contexts and to abstract and draw from prior skills and knowledge” (315). Said another way, deep writing asks students to analyze, interpret, question, and offer individual insights rather than to “report” given information to a generalized audience. Alfredo Celedon Lujan’s contention that “Good writing is a student thinking on paper, using words unique to her or him—voice, a rhetorical stamp, citing the text, attributing quotes, answering the question thoughtfully, creating intelligent prose, poetry, or poetic prose” (55–56) is also reminiscent of the definition of deep writing. Similarly, Edward White in “My Five-Paragraph-Theme Theme,” explains that “most of what [he] value[s] about writing is . . . reflection, understanding of the issues, awareness of other perspectives on the topic, and an understanding of the relation of writing to thinking” (139).

These are the same issues, though, with which writers in this study as well as those in Kara Taczak and William Thelin’s dual enrollment study grappled. For example, in Taczak and Thelin’s study, Shannon “had trouble seeing herself as a knowledge-maker and did not feel that she learned more about herself through writing” (13), while Juliet “did not revise to clear up . . . contradictions” and “showed no signs of understanding the needs of an audience” (14). Specifically, two of the students interviewed for this study indicated at semester’s end that their approach to writing would return to surface-level concerns when they exited the College Writing I course.

The Writing Process

Deep writing, then, requires a reflective and recursive writing process that goes beyond writing formulas and surface-level issues—a territory many students have not encountered due to the constraints of high school writing instruction. To this point, the majority of instructors in the pilot study and all those in the follow-up study have either made specific comment to or alluded to the prohibitive nature of teaching a recursive writing process
given the average English teacher's workload. In her article “The Truth about High School English,” Milka Mustenikova Mosely writes of the dilemma of incorporating writing instruction when so many other elements vie for attention in the English classroom. She states: “it is important for college educators to understand that our English classes are not composition classes, but are surveys of literature classes . . . We also cover study skills, grammar, and vocabulary” (61). Kim concurs: “You have to understand that high school teachers have literature, vocabulary, and a lot more students to teach; in other words, there’s not enough time [to teach writing thoroughly]. We did four-five major writings per year. I fault the education system . . . I fault the state mandates.”

The sheer number of students for which a solitary high school teacher might be responsible also creates a dilemma. One year alone, I taught 170+ high school students per day. Sharon, who has also shouldered large class loads, explains: “When dealing with 65–85 students per day in regular high school classes, assigning lots of writing becomes basically impossible (at least not too often). Grading becomes overwhelming and conferencing individually is nearly impossible.” According to instructors in this study, high student-to-teacher ratios results in a decrease in writing assignments. Their responses shed additional light on the findings of Vanderbilt’s Steve Graham whose national survey of high school teachers revealed that “There’s very little writing going on” in secondary classrooms and “very little teaching of writing” (“Interview”). Kim explains that prior to teaching College Writing I she typically gave her high school students a writing assignment and a due date; in between she incorporated virtually no pre-planning pedagogy and required very little revision upon the part of her students. Thus, although “process” is hardly a new approach to writing, it might be regarded as novel for the transitioning high school writers, since their writing experiences have heretofore been integrated among other curricula and impacted by class size—factors that constrain most secondary English teachers from devoting much instructional time to recursive writing practices.18

It should also be noted that, in an effort to thwart plagiarism, some high school teachers (whether the in English classroom or in other courses) often mandate that students craft writing assignments during school hours or under the watchful guidance of the teacher. As Jean notes, her high school English instructor “had us compose on the spot.” Mark experienced similar scenarios, as did Jack, who states, “At high school, in some classes, all the writing has to be done at school, so time is an issue for doing rough drafts and final drafts.” Jean described a similar “hand-held” approach to writing instruction that occur predominantly within the confines of the school day. This approach, unlike the aforementioned “hands-off” method used by Kim, “walks” the students through a writing assignment. Jean explains: “in high school, the teacher does each step with you.” Sharon adds an instructor’s perspective, stating, “In high school we spoon feed them [the students] step-by-step.” Another student, Tonya, adds, “At the college level, there is no
hand-holding; you have to keep up. They’re not going to walk you through every step.”

These findings suggest that implementing a writing “process” in the high school classroom might range on a continuum from a hands-off, find-your-own-process approach to a step-by-step process formula. As a result, many high school students in this study were not accustomed to independently drafting various versions of a writing assignment. Kasey claims she “didn’t get much direction in revision in high school,” and Mark cites process work and reflective revision, in particular, among the new concepts he learned in College Writing I. Likewise, Kristie admits that she “never thought about rewriting things, [but] I found out [from the dual enrollment writing course] it’s better if you rewrite.” And Gabe claims he had to “steadily revise” while crafting his College Writing I assignments, a step he did not incorporate in writing assignments prior to the course. Participants in Taczak and Thelin’s study expressed a similar dissonance in regard to revision in the dual enrolled composition classroom; specifically, Juliet wanted to see sample essays without “mistakes” in them when her instructor modeled writing of his own in the drafting stage (15). Students’ perception of revision was even more clearly revealed when those in the study described the multiple drafts, revisions, and re-writes of their work in their college composition course as a “difference in instruction”—reminiscent of Williams and McEnerney’s comment that “something different” is being asked of students when they enter college writing classrooms.

All this is not to say, though, that some form of “process” does not occur in high school writing instruction. In fact, at least in the state of Ohio, K-12 English Language Arts teachers are required to instruct students as early as kindergarten in “writing processes,” which according to Ohio Department of Education’s Academic Content Standards “includes the phases of prewriting, drafting, revising and editing and publishing” as well as “revision strategies to improve the content, organization and language of their writing” (96). In fact, Jean states that she had “already been doing process work” on the high school level prior to entering the dual-enrolled college writing class; however, she described the process as “more chunked up” than what she was doing in college, since, at the high school level, she was required to do “a little bit each night, because the work was due the next morning” (read this as the aforementioned “step-by-step” process). As such, the “process work” described by Jean suggests an act more linear than recursive and may indicate “steps” in the writing process rather than process as part of reflective revision. To gloss this point a bit—if, as Lavelle and Guarino claim, “Active, comprehensive revision is the defining element of deep writing,” and deep writing functions as a “tool of thinking” (302), then “reflective-revision” is unlikely to happen among writers at the secondary-level given teacher’s heavy instructional loads and differing definitions of (as well as approaches to) process. Instead, in the words of Taczak and Thelin’s subject, Shannon, revision remains for many high school students a process of “fixing and delet-
“ing” (13). Furthermore, state mandated tests such as the writing portion of the OGT are timed; as a result, these types of tests lend themselves mainly to proof-reading and editing processes—not reflective-revision processes.

Unfortunately, the dual enrollment students in this study gave very little indication they would continue to replicate the recursive processes they had learned when composing papers for courses or writing assignments outside their college composition course. For example, at the end of the semester, only 33% of the students included revising as one of the necessary steps to writing a good essay. And although each student surveyed demonstrated a cognizance of the need for process (at least when it came to writing “English” papers), their responses for writing in general indicated that process would not be part of their writing routine. Greg states that there is a “different approach to writing an English paper than a science paper,” and Luke admitted that only “sometimes” did he “get a peer review or go to the writing center” for papers outside of English class. Still, Kim has witnessed some “buy in” and comments that she routinely sees change in her students’ approach to process by the end of the semester, as they engage in “more pre-planning and are more willing to change the entire focus if the paper is not going in the direction they want; they start over; change topic; I see a lot more interest and effort.”

Since composition theory has demonstrated that engaging in process can help students think more deeply about what they are communicating in their writing and how they are communicating, then it is reasonable to assert that clear definitions of and instruction in the process of writing may improve student transition from high school to college-level writing expectations. As Lavelle and Guarnio state, “Reflective-revision strategies involve taking charge in order to create meaning when writing. Writing is viewed as a tool for creating meaning and exploring ideas rather than for just telling what is known” (298). Lavelle and Guarnio’s words on process and revision seem especially pertinent in that the students in this study described their writing experience prior to taking the college writing course as mainly in the area of “research” and “reports” (“just telling what is known”) (298) rather than in a more argumentative, thesis-driven vein (“creating meaning”) (298). Again, what may be further extrapolated is that writing instruction that utilizes a reflective and recursive process has the likelihood of increasing student awareness of and ability to compose works that create rather than report information. To that point, Lavelle and Guarino’s suggestion that “Teaching and modeling revision, as opposed to editing, is key both in college and earlier”19 seems worthy of note (302).

The gap between editing for “surface” issues versus the “deep” revision measures expected of college-level writing should be approached with caution here in order to avoid the impulse to simply read surface writing as “bad” and deep writing as “good.” Instead, Lavelle and Guarino emphasize the necessity of both skills when they state: “We are not suggesting that surface skills are not important: only that alone they do not constitute deep
writing and that mastery alone is not enough” (302–303). In other words, good writing can be achieved when the two work in tandem; the trick is intertwining the surface and the deep within the context of the college writing classroom. According to Winalski:

The transition from high school to university writing is not as simple as the memorization of a few grammar handouts; rather, it consists of a student’s willingness to learn, understand, and modify the rules that govern language in order to communicate ideas. (307)

Winalski’s words suggest that students must gain a rhetorical awareness (“rules that govern language in order to communicate ideas”) in order to don the “writerly identity” of a college student, a point which calls to mind Foster and Russell’s contention that, ultimately, at the college level “students must develop a chameleon rhetorical capacity” to tailor their word choice and writing style to suit the needs of different contexts and/or disciplines (43). This capacity allows students “to draw from their full range of discursive knowledge . . . in order to negotiate what they perceive as new and future rhetorical situations” (Reiff and Bawarshi 331). Again, though, all these comments imply that the onus of transitioning the composition threshold lies solely on the students—students who have spent their high school years reporting and editing instead of creating meaning through revision in their own writing.

The Call for Collaboration, Conversation, and Professional Development

To put it simply, while students certainly own some responsibility in transitioning themselves from high school to college-level writing expectations, the real key to ameliorating gaps between secondary and post-secondary writing instruction is open, respectful, and productive dialogue among instructors on both sides of the composition threshold. Furthermore, as revealed in this study, it is likely that instructors exist on either side of the divide who do possess an understanding of each level’s differing foci. To be certain, some secondary English teachers obviously see (if not name) the “surface” and “deep” writing dichotomy, and as a result, push their students (sometimes successfully, sometimes not) from the surface to the deep—even if this is not their particular charge. It is also likely that some university writing professors may “adjust their instruction to capitalise on well-honed” surface skills as well as “offer appropriate remediation” (Lavelle and Guarino 303) to students who have not been exposed to deep writing assignments.

Still, if an awareness of each level’s writing expectations were uniformly true on the part of secondary and post-secondary writing instructors, there would be less need for this discussion or for remedial writing classes at the post-secondary level. Until then, there will continue to be high school writ-
ing instruction which overvalues and over-rewards surface elements just as there will continue to be university professors who perceive their students’ struggles with deep writing as an indication of inadequacies in previous instruction. In the meantime, writing students may find themselves stranded somewhere between what they know and what they are supposed to know.

Moreover, this study reveals that a possible re-inscription of the writing divide may be occurring. In explanation, at the end of the semester, the dual enrollment participants, overall, described themselves as “better” writers. As mentioned earlier, Tonya described College Writing I as “more beneficial” than her high school writing instruction, and Shelley commented on “how mediocre” her writing was prior to taking the course. And Kasey remarked that she “learned more from this college class than writing other papers in high school.” Whether Kasey and the others actually learned more or learned different elements in her college writing instruction is open for debate. However, if students interpret the foci of college-level writing as superior to that of high school writing instruction—read “I am a better writer, because my college composition course stressed different elements of writing that my secondary writing instruction never did and now I am privy to those elements”—then better fails to acknowledge the existence of different. In the words of Kim, “It worries me, because I don’t want them [the dual enrollment students] to . . . say ‘we’re doing things all wrong at the high school level.’” I harbor similar concerns. Since high school teachers bear heavier instructional, curricular, and assessment loads than many of their post-secondary counterparts, they often view instructional advice from those “in the tower” with suspicion: the day-to-day practicalities of secondary writing instruction do not meet neatly with the ideals espoused by college composition instructors.

Fortunately, dual enrollment writing classrooms, such as the ones in this study, can serve as conduits for collaboration, conversation, and professional development since these are spaces where high school and college students and instructors come together. A host of educators and scholars either acknowledge the need for or explicitly call for increased communication across the high school/college writing divide (see, for example, Davies, Mosely, Kittle, Bauman, Alsup and Bernard-Donals, Kapanke and Westemeier, Jennings and Hunn, Thompson and Gallagher, Taczak and Thelin, and Sehulster). And the potential for success through collaboration and conversation is evidenced in efforts described in the works of Katherine Hughes, Michael Vivion, Wendy Strachan, Peter Kittle, Herb Budden et al. and Sheridan Blau, respectively. However, the caution here is in regard to what constitutes those conversations and how those conversations evolve. Specifically, these must be two-way dialogues among affected parties at both levels—a point not consistently noted by those lobbying for such conversations. Taczak and Thelin describe this “outreach” as “a historically difficult bridge to cross” (21) And as Kittle argues, unless participants from both sides of the discussion bring the proper attitudes, introspections, and respect to
the table, such conversations may serve to intensify tensions between the two camps. He warns:

I fear that, without being able to establish the kinds of professional relationships that are predicated on mutual respect for teaching abilities, subject matter knowledge, and academic values, any ideas being propounded by college writing teachers will be seen as just another mandate from above. (143)

Since Kittle has (as have I) resided on both sides of the writing threshold, we are sensitive to the assumptions and suspicions that may cloud these needed dialogues.

With that said, when broached with a spirit of openness, dual enrollment collaborations have the potential to inform and energize those who genuinely yearn to understand the unique charges and constraints inherent to each level of instruction. Kathleen Blake Yancey and Brian M. Morrison describe a summer program at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro where dual enrollment teachers from high school campus sites “gather on the college campus to think about how they teach composition, to share assignments and response strategies, and to compare what they do with practices in the college writing program” (274). Likewise, Patricia Sehulster outlines sample activities, agendas, and readings with which high school and college participants have engaged during “Writing Forums” at her community college (349–352). Even less formal ventures such as university instructor Tom Thompson’s guest lectures in Andrea Gallagher’s high school classroom (see Hansen and Farris’s collection) can lead to rich exchanges of ideas and practices and can help pave the way for “shaping better messages about writing instruction” (Taczk and Thelin 21).

Both formal and informal opportunities to discuss writing instruction are embedded in The University of Findlay’s dual enrollment mentorship program where high school English teachers and UF English instructors collaborate to build, sustain, and provide high-quality dual enrollment instruction. Those training to become dual enrollment composition instructors participate in a week-long intensive course in composition theory that challenges them to reflect upon their own philosophies as writing instructors. During the week, seasoned dual enrollment instructors and faculty from The University of Findlay’s English Department spend time sharing their experiences of teaching college writing. The dual enrollment instructor candidates then spend the next several weeks building their syllabi and assignments. In this process, they maintain freedom to choose materials and pedagogical approaches while working within the framework of the English department’s expectations. Most importantly, though, is the exchange of information: university faculty members become more aware of the trends and demands in secondary writing instruction, and the dual enrollment instructors (new and seasoned) become increasingly cognizant of college-level writing expectations.
As a continued form of professional development and support at The University of Findlay, dual enrollment composition instructors come to campus twice per year to calibrate grading, share pedagogical techniques, contribute to the development of course assignments as well as the portfolio grading rubric, and discuss the challenges of teaching writers from high school to college-level writing expectations. Technology has added another layer of collaboration in that college writing faculty can now easily “enter” high school dual enrollment writing classrooms via Skype for collaborative exchanges.

Overall, anonymous survey results as well as face-to-face conversation, and email exchanges from instructors in the program describe initial training and on-going professional development opportunities as “transformational” in regard to their approaches to writing instruction. One instructor reflects, “I spend more time evaluating, set higher expectations, and try to influence my fellow teachers in the English department to do a better, more thorough job of teaching writing—beyond the formulaic OGT required writing!” Another instructor states, “I feel that the training I’ve had as a DE [dual enrollment] instructor has made me more confident and more prepared for the CC [Common Core].” Still another instructor adds, “Because of teaching College Writing I, I have revamped and up-graded the Jr./Sr. composition classes I teach. In fact, students of mine who have gone on to college thank me for how well prepared they were [for college writing].” Similarly, one veteran in the program states, “I didn’t realize how much I had integrated the philosophy [of writing instruction] into the lower [high school] levels [I teach].” “Now that I am totally aware of what is expected in a college writing class, I push my high school students to aspire to the same level,” says another.

When asked to describe the impact teaching College Writing I has had on her instruction in her other courses, Janet remarked, “I don’t know where to begin . . . there were gray areas, weaknesses in my teaching that have been strengthened . . . I’m learning so much.” She reiterated this point on her written survey by describing the impact teaching in dual enrollment classroom has had on the pedagogies she employs when teaching writing in other situations; she writes, “I go back into the high school with new strategies from the college-level . . . I took what I had from [College Writing I] and then expected more from my high school juniors—[I decided to] bring it up a notch.” Not only have Janet’s high school student felt the impact of her College Writing I teaching experience; her colleagues have as well, since she openly shares with them the new ideas, information, and techniques she has garnered from collaborating with her dual enrollment instructor-peers.

College faculty members, too, have benefited from the collaboration. One, in particular, shared that “it [the dual enrollment partnership] challenges me to think beyond my own classroom space and consider how what I do in my classroom intersects with what other teachers have done in theirs.” Furthermore, I have benefitted professionally in numerous ways from the
exchange of pedagogical strategies that occurs during our collaborative sessions. From supplementary text suggestions to providing a clearer picture of how students might “come to recognize a task” (Reiff and Bawarshi 332), my writing instructor peers at the high school level have enriched my ability to “cue,” “prime,” and “guide” (331) my students through College Writing I. Simply put, collaborating across dual enrollment spaces makes good sense: formerly frustrated college composition and high school English teachers can finally quit un-doing one another’s work and move toward the common goal of transitioning student writers from one level of instruction to the next.

Conclusion

In High School-College Partnerships: Conceptual Models, Programs and Issues, Arthur Greenburg writes that “the future” of high school and college writing instruction “is dependent on the performance of the other” (xv). Likewise, Taczak and Thelin argue that “if we are to shape a consistent, strong, effective message [of writing instruction], we cannot ignore this collaboration” (21). Historically, a lack of open communication across the writing threshold has served to hinder rather than to pave a smooth pathway for students transitioning from high school to college-level writing expectations, and, as a result, each side often has differing goals and ways of defining elements of writing even while “depending” on the other. In the meantime, organizations such as the Alliance for Excellent Education claim that high schools need to “revamp instruction” in order to “be aligned to the expectations of colleges.” Such moves evoke the top-down theory of education that groups such as NCTE have long fought against. A better answer, to borrow from Sehulster, is to “consciously work to inform one another’s teaching and ultimately our students’ learning and readiness for college-level writing” (343) via candid, reciprocal conversation between high school teachers and college instructors. The voices of students should also be included in these dialogues and research as, ultimately, the writing they produce—and the struggle or ease with which they produce it—are indicators of how well we, as composition instructors, speak the same language.

And perhaps, as this study suggests, the dual enrolled composition classroom may be a place “to make changes, to train a new generation, and to talk to one another” (Brantley and Brantley 220), since it is in this space that high school teachers, college instructors, and students all have a stake in the learning outcomes. What remains to be seen is whether the limited findings indicative of this small-scale study of UF’s dual enrolled writing programs hold true at similar universities among like populations. For example, how prevalent is the dilemma of “reporting” versus “creating meaning” through writing? What are best practices for addressing issues of practicality and efficacy in high school writing instruction? How might instructors better aid students in their transfer of high school writing strategies such as formulas and surface writing skills to new contexts and for new purposes while simultaneously maintaining the goals and integrity of...
each level of instruction? And, finally, how might clearer, shared definitions of revision and process improve students’ abilities to balance and integrate elements of surface and deep writing as they move from secondary to post-secondary writing expectations? Transitioning writers across the composition threshold is challenging, labor-intensive, rewarding, and collaborative work. Paying attention to what the dual enrollment classroom can teach us may make that work a bit easier.

Notes

1. According to the U.S. Department of Education, “The term ‘dual enrollment’ refers to an arrangement where students are enrolled in courses that count for both high school and college credit. These programs are also called ‘dual credit’ or ‘concurrent enrollment’” (1).

2. Recent definitions differentiate “concurrent enrollment” from “dual enrollment.” NACEP defines a concurrent enrollment program as one “in which the high school student travels to the college campus or college faculty travel to the high school”; it is also defined as “programs where the student takes a course from a college instructor via distance education” (“What is concurrent enrollment?”) “Dual credit” refers to students earning both high school and college credit for the successful completion of a college-level course (Allen 2).

3. This study was approved by The University of Findlay’s IRB. The author utilized consent forms and has changed students’ as well as teachers’ names to protect their anonymity.

4. The follow-up phase of the study is on-going; findings shared in this article represent the initial pilot study (2007) and four years of subsequent data.

5. In 2009, The University of Findlay discontinued its dual-enrolled-only on-campus sections of College Writing I.

6. The number of concurrent enrollment instructors for The University of Findlay fluctuates per year. The number twenty-two is the number of individual UF concurrent enrollment instructors that have taught in the program from 2007–2012.

7. “Representative” is defined as one “high” or A paper, one “medium” or B/C range paper, and one “low” or C-/below paper.

8. When this study began in 2007, students in College Writing I took a final exam (worth 10% of their overall grade) at the end of the course. In Fall 2009, The University of Findlay implemented a portfolio review system for College Writing I students; this serves as the exit assessment for the course, and student work is scored as “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory” via a common rubric.

9. Similar to dual enrolled students, the dual enrollment instructors in this study are in the unique position of teaching college writing while being simultaneously immersed or well studied in the elements of high school writing.

10. These numbers are based on experience as well as on survey and discussion responses from participating instructors.

11. Given the arbitrary nature of the definition of “college-level writing,” the “college-level” writing elements discussed here refer to those stressed by The University of Findlay in its College Writing I syllabus template.
12. Elsewhere in this study it has been noted how difficult it is to define both “high school-level writing” and “college-level writing” since some core elements and certainly subtleties of each vary greatly from instructional institution to instructional institution. However, for the sake of this study and due to the credentials of the instructor-participants, who (with the exception of one) have taught or currently teach in secondary and post-secondary writing classrooms, some assumptions are made here regarding the characteristics of writing taught at each level.

13. The students' and instructors' names in this study have been changed to protect their anonymity.


15. According to student respondents in this survey and per my own experience as a high school teacher, this statement generally holds true for disciplines on the secondary level outside of English as well. For example, the student respondents noted history and science as other courses in which they had been required to write “reports.”

16. As noted elsewhere, the testing described here is based on that in the state of Ohio.

17. In 2010, the Ohio Department of Education (along with 44 other states) adopted a Common Core Curriculum (CCC) of standards to replace the current English Language Arts Content Standards. The CCC is scheduled to be phased into public school systems over a four year period with full implementation by 2014.

18. It is also worth noting that, while most college writing instruction includes one-on-one instructor-student conferencing sessions, such sessions are rare at the secondary level given the typical high school English teacher's workload.

19. Italics added.


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