
A Model of Collaboration: One Teacher's Composition Class and the Reading/Writing Center

by Roy Andrews, Bruce Johnson, Mike Puia, Pat Parmenter, and
Nancy Hill

Part one: A View From the Writing Center

by Roy Andrews

About a year ago, Bruce Johnson, a composition teacher at Plymouth State College, stopped by the Reading/Writing Center to tell me that he had restructured his course and that his students were going to start using the Center a lot. He explained that he would now use Donald Murray's *Write to Learn*, and that his approach would be a process approach, which, he gathered from our faculty mailings, would work well with what we do at the Center. I expressed my enthusiasm and promised that we would do all we could to reinforce what he was doing in class.

When he left, I wondered if his students really would visit. Each semester I talk with faculty from just about every department, and most of them tell me that they value what is done at the Center and recommend the Center to their students (in person, on their syllabi, in notes on papers they pass back) but that despite their efforts, most of their students still don't use the Center enough.

It did not take long for me and another writing consultant, Nancy Hill, to realize that something unusual was happening in Bruce's composition classes. Not only did his students start visiting the Center, but they came to write. These were writers, engaged in their papers, who asked specific questions, such as "Do you think I should focus this paper on what

homeopathic medicine is or on how the AMA keeps trying to discredit it?” or “Do you think this paper on free will versus determinism is too dry and technical for a composition class?” These first-year students were writing about things they cared about, wanted to think deeply about, and wanted to communicate to others. They were writers. We at the Center responded to their writings and became involved in learning with them. We watched some of these students reshape early drafts as they reconsidered their audience or sharpened their focus. We listened to one student talk at length about his night and day in jail and how that was going to ruin his life, and then we watched him reclaim control of his life by turning his misadventure into a fascinating paper.

Nancy and I began to speculate on what was going on. Not only were Bruce’s composition students pouring into the Center in record numbers, but Bruce also visited during the semester, sometimes to ask questions about specific writing concerns, such as documentation conventions, and always to ask how his students were doing. We had been sending him notes about all visits from his students, and when he visited we would talk in depth about some of those. We also took the opportunity of his visits to ask him about the secrets of his success.

In the last few weeks of the semester, Bruce’s students began to ask different kinds of questions: “When can you use a semi-colon?” “Do you think this paragraph is too wordy?” “Can you help me check my paper for errors?” His students were going back over their papers and polishing them for their final portfolios. They had writing they were proud of, writing that mattered to them, so they were willing to spend the time and energy it takes to fine-tune and proofread carefully.

Nancy and I began to realize, after talking with Bruce, observing his students, and talking with each other, that the kind of collaboration he had initiated between the writing

center and his composition classes could be initiated in other courses across the curriculum. During one of his visits to the Center, we suggested he write something for the *WAC Journal* that explained how he encouraged the collaboration. It evolved into the following.

Part two: How I Encourage Collaboration Between My Composition Classes and the Reading/Writing Center
by Bruce Johnson

The major goal of a composition course is to encourage students to become the best writers they can. This means that C students can become A or B students, and that A students can become A+ students. It is expected that they will learn from this course and apply their new skills to other courses, and therefore, college success. In this endeavor, I stress that I am on their side, by their side, lending support.

Recently I made some major changes in my approach to teaching writing. Because of my strong desire to help students write their best papers, I want to challenge them to their individual limits. I want to see them putting more effort into their work, even those already producing top papers, and I want to see overall quality improve. Some of the changes relate to reshaping my efforts regarding the course. Other changes relate to incorporating the Plymouth State College Reading/Writing Center more fully.

Students in my composition classes focus on three major learning components. The first component is learning to write through reading. The course text is Donald Murray's *Write to Learn*, and the emphasis is on creating and using a writing process. Students read and respond, through writing and speaking, and share ideas. The second component stems from

Donald Murray and includes regular daybook writing. The emphasis is on consistent writing, not necessarily quality. This writing allows students to write daily, freely, on individually chosen topics. Daybook topics can relate to what students are thinking about and communicating. Writing becomes real. Many students tend to use daybook entries as ideas for paper assignments. The third and final component relates to assigned papers. Although assignments often relate to certain criteria, and all papers require some sort of writing process, students are encouraged to make papers their own and choose their own topics. For example, for research papers they are asked to write about a person or topic within their major course of study. They are then free to choose their topics and pursue personal interests. Students are respected for their variety of interests and opinions.

On the first day of classes, I share with students that “What you get out of this class depends upon what you put into this class.” If students want to participate fully, read and respond to all of the readings, complete the daybook honestly, create and use a writing process, and write and rewrite papers, they will not only earn the highest grade, but improve their writing. In other words, I challenge students to become the best writers they can become. To further this, I talk to each student daily, in class, and share some sort of enthusiasm and interest in their writing.

Through positive reinforcement, I recognize the best in a student’s work, and I encourage that student to continue writing. I offer suggestions carefully without saying, “You must do this,” but rather, “Try this. It might work.” In addition, I incorporate peer editing, which further encourages the writer to try something new. If the new way works, fine; if not, that’s fine, too. The writer, not the teacher or the peer editor, has the final say.

Similarly, I employ portfolio concepts where students

pass in all assigned papers, drafts, and pre-writing activities and decide which papers are their best at showing off their writing skills and therefore should be graded. The main expectation is that chosen papers show the use of a writing process. With the idea that the best writing takes time to develop, students are encouraged to use one of the writing process models discussed in class, or they are encouraged to create their own writing process. The portfolio allows students to show growth, and most importantly, to take risks and try something new, without the fear of the final grade. If the risk works, the paper can be graded. If the risk doesn't work, something else will, and the next paper can be graded.

When students are successful, motivated, and engaged in writing, they feel at ease and have a strong desire to learn. I encourage students to use all resources available to improve their writing skills. The most obvious resource is the classroom teacher. A second resource is classroom peers and dormitory or other friends. Another resource is the Plymouth State College Reading/Writing Center.

The writing consultants in the Reading/Writing Center emphasize a writing process, and the help they offer parallels the help I offer in class. The writing consultants are not available for just proofreading papers, but are more available for helping students brainstorm ideas, develop focus or main idea statements, and work on outlines and organization. Students who improve their papers at the Reading/Writing Center before visiting me for conferences have better and more polished papers to talk about. The readers at the Center allow me to become a second or third reader and concentrate on a variety of additional writing skills.

I find that most students are, at first, skeptical about visiting a place like the Reading/Writing Center. This is particularly true of first year students to whom such services may be something new. Yet, once the students stop into the

Center, see what the Center offers, and meet the writing consultants, they are likely to return for help. I begin presenting the Center to students on the first day of classes. Here are four ways to encourage students to visit:

1. Invite Reading/Writing Center writing consultants to visit classes and share ideas about what they offer. Teachers can tailor the presentation to individual class needs. For example, in a recent visit to a composition class, I asked the representative, this time Roy, to share the importance of a writing process and how the Center and I are in synch and work well together.

2. More importantly, as teacher, continuously talk up the Reading/Writing Center. Mention daily, even if in just one sentence, for one half minute, that writing consultants at the Center are available for help. Ask students who have been to the Center to share their reactions with the class. The short amount of time this takes pays off with additional student visits.

3. Entice students to visit the Reading/Writing Center by allowing them to write (for credit) a short, one page response of their reactions to a visit. This often yields a double bonus as students tend to write something positive and therefore end up encouraging themselves to return.

4. Finally, when students visit the Center, the writing consultants are willing to record and send reports to teachers. Ask for these reports and read them carefully. Follow up by talking with the students individually. Ask questions about the paper worked on. Also ask questions about the services available at the Center and show an honest interest in what they are doing.

I consistently ask students about their visits to the Center, and I listen to their reactions and respond with questions. Sometimes the questions are simple, such as “With whom did you work?” or “What did you work on?” Other times the questions are more specific, such as, “What is

glossing a paper?” or “How was the glossing activity helpful?” What is most interesting is that when students begin talking about their experiences, they tend to realize more fully the value of the time they spent there.

In addition, I read and reply to students’ written responses. These may be responses for credit, something in a daybook, or something included in a portfolio. Student responses are wonderfully revealing. Here are some examples of student comments:

- “The Reading/Writing Center was great.”
- “All in all, the Reading/Writing Center receives an A+ for outstanding help.”
- “I am very impressed with my work now that I have gone to them (Reading/Writing Center).”
- “I left the Reading/Writing Center confident that I could find help whenever I need it.”
- “It seems like he (the writing consultant) knew the *Writer’s Reference Guide* like the back of his hand.”

Sometimes I reply to these reports in writing and sometimes orally. A simple response goes a long way towards reinforcing the importance of time spent at the Center. Although it is important to react to student responses immediately, it is also important to remind successful students a week or so later, after two weeks of not visiting the Center, to return. This is the time to remind them of their comments that the Center is, in their own words, “Great,” or that the Center deserves an “A+” for effort.

One day during a recent class discussion about the Reading/Writing Center offerings, I asked students to share success stories. Many students shared positive experiences related to visiting the Center. One asked me if I had success stories to share. I reiterated my original stand that the Center helps all

students, including A and B students, not just those having difficulty. Then I added another thought: I have encouraged over 300 students to visit the Center. I have had only one, just one student, return with a negative comment. All other students have returned with positive comments. That, without a doubt, is a success story.

Students who are excited about learning and writing have fire in their eyes and pens. The students who are most excited are the ones who are encouraged to work with both their teacher and the Reading/Writing Center consultants. These students achieve the ultimate success, the best papers possible. Here are testimonials from two such students, Mike and then Pat.

Part three: An Environment Where a Student Writer Feels Valued

by Mike Puia

What makes my writing better now than it was in the past, before Mr. Johnson's composition class and my discovery of the Reading/Writing Center? That, to me, is a query that cannot be answered in complete entirety, yet there are certain traits/characteristics that Mr. Johnson and the people at the Reading/Writing Center instilled in me that enabled me to improve my writing.

Mr. Johnson's success in making better writers of students and enabling some of them to appreciate writing as an art form can be explained in short by a list of three individual yet interactive ideas:

1. "You get what you put into this class."
2. The three R's—reinforcement, recognition, and repetition.
3. Constructive guidance, NOT constructive criticism.

“You get what you put into this class,” a quote from Mr. Johnson, was the basis for my success in composition. To excel in his class, you had to put forth an honest effort. If you came in as an “A” writer from high school, fine, but you would not obtain an “A” if your writing did not show improvement; each paper should be like a stepping stone in the long path to perfecting one’s writing.

The pathway to improvement is comprised of three key elements: reinforcement, recognition, and repetition. What I call the three R’s. It would be impossible for me to recall the number of freewrites Mr. Johnson had the class perform. Mr. Johnson always picked an idea that we had to write about, and I prided myself on being able to find a controversial aspect to it. The freewrite, to me, was the best part of the class; everyone could share ideas, and most important of all, you were allowed to speak your mind about others’ writing. I am sure I made a few enemies because of my constructive comments; yet I learned one thing—to see the flaws in other students’ writing and try to avoid them when I wrote. Mr. Johnson would always respond after each student read his/her piece, and I can’t ever recall a negative comment on his part. He just wanted us to write. Believe me, our freewrites were far from perfect. The theory behind his madness was recognition of one’s ideas and attitudes, regardless of writing ability, and the need to continually write in order to learn. Mr. Johnson made me feel good; the freewrites, the students, his response to work, and the sharing made me feel like an integral part of the class. Simply stated I felt good; therefore, I liked to write.

The final step in the process of bettering one’s writing centers around constructive guidance, not constructive criticism. Mr. Johnson assigned three take home essays. Each essay was designed to measure the amount of progress made from the previous one. You did not have to be a perfect

writer to earn a good grade; you simply had to show a reasonable level of improvement. Mr. Johnson's expectations were so high, I knew that to succeed I would have to get some feedback. Acknowledging this, I went to the Reading/Writing Center.

I cannot place a value on the Center's existence. I have learned so many things: glossing, proper use of semi-colons, run-on sentence identification, wordiness, . . . the list could go on, but it doesn't have to. The point is that the Center and the people there have helped me improve my writing in a manner that stays with me. I am continually learning from them.

Perhaps of more importance, however, is that I feel welcome there. When I walk in I am greeted energetically and with a smile. These people know me by name. I feel like I'm Norm on the set of *Cheers*. I sense that I always have a place to go where I can do relatively no wrong. My writing usually concerns personal views of things that have happened to me. The people at the Center made me realize that writing can take many forms, can mean many things, and can be a way of getting to know yourself and heal old wounds. After only one semester here, I look at writing from a new perspective.

By writing this paper, I have realized two things. First, to better one's writing, it is almost necessary to write on a topic or in an area that in some way makes you feel like you're a good person, that makes you feel proud or relieved, that makes you feel like you have contributed to society in some form that will change opinions, unite beliefs, and better your environment. Second, it is much easier to learn in an environment where you feel comfortable and valued. Mr. Johnson's composition class and the Reading/Writing Center have found the key to creating that environment—love passionately what you do AND appreciate the individuals upon whom you are trying to instill knowledge. Get to know your students apart from their I.D. codes, and try to create a setting filled with

good thoughts and constructive guidance.

Part four: The Importance of Response

by Pat Parmenter

My experience with the Reading/Writing Center has been like many students' in some ways, but my perspective may be different than most. Like many non-traditional students, I worked for years before returning to college. Writing was an important part of my responsibilities, especially in my most recent position as Marketing Manager at a computer mapping company. I am probably more aware than most students of the amount of writing we are expected to do when we enter the work force and how much someone else's reaction and opinion can help achieve the desired results.

I began my Plymouth State College experience last semester following completion of my associate degree requirements at another school. One of my first courses was English Composition with Mr. Johnson. He immediately introduced us to the help available at the Reading/Writing Center. Shortly thereafter, Ms. Smith informed those of us who were taking Introduction to Education that we would be writing a "log" about our twenty or more hours of observation and participation at a public school during the semester. She, too, encouraged us to use the Reading/Writing Center while informing us that spelling, grammar, and form would weigh heavily in our grade for the paper. Both of these instructors emphasized that writing is a process rather than something to be hammered out on a typewriter or computer the day before our papers are due.

Having worked in jobs that required a great deal of writing, I had my own process fairly well developed before

taking these courses or visiting the Reading/Writing Center. My main concern was learning to write effectively for the audience I wanted to reach and to improve my form. I learned what works for one paper doesn't work for the next, and each new undertaking requires a process of planning, drafting, discussing, and revising.

My first visit to the Reading/Writing Center was for a research paper on the Alaskan oil spill for Mr. Johnson's class. I had acquired a wealth of information on the topic but felt that the paper didn't flow very well and that it may have been too technical for an English composition class. Part of our writing process for that class was sharing our papers with our peers, and I was concerned that I would lose my audience with the technical details that interested me but may have been of little interest to my classmates. Roy helped me most by discussing alternatives and answering honestly when asked if he felt certain parts were too dry. Our sessions together consisted mostly of discussing alternative forms of expressing an idea or concept on the first draft, with follow-up sessions to refine the essay to create a final draft.

The drafting, discussing, and refining process served me well when the time came to write our Introduction to Education "log." This was an entirely different type of paper than we had been writing in English composition both in form and length. With an expected result of eight to twelve pages, my drafting process consisted of writing one or two of the many sections and bringing just that portion to the Reading/Writing Center for review. Writing and assessing one section at a time was much more effective for me than bringing a completed draft to the Center and trying to work on the whole thing at once.

Perhaps the biggest help I receive at the Center is hearing someone else read aloud what I have written. "Is that really what you want to say?" Roy sometimes asks. "Oops," is my frequent response. I'm often so familiar with what I'm trying

to say that I don't catch errors through proofreading alone. Hearing my words spoken by someone else often shows me where I need more work.

When Roy approached me to write a portion of this article, we immediately entered into a familiar conversational pattern. "What's the objective?" I asked. "Who's the audience?" Roy replied. These are questions Roy and I have been over time and again during my frequent visits to the Reading/Writing Center. These now familiar questions are what begins the writing process for me.

Part five: A Summary of Mr. Johnson's Success Creating a Collaborative Relationship with the Reading/Writing Center

by Nancy Hill

I have had the opportunity to work with many students from Bruce Johnson's composition classes. Certain characteristics about these students stand out. First, they don't rush into the Center at the last minute, hoping that someone here will quickly proofread their papers. Instead, they visit us shortly after an assignment is given and continue these visits throughout the entire writing process. Second, most of Bruce's students have a positive attitude about visiting the Center and are enthusiastic about the papers they are working on. Third, these students are willing to take some risks with their writing—to talk openly about their ideas and experiences and to try new things.

I have learned that what we are seeing in these students is a direct result of Bruce's attitude toward young writers. From the outset, he lets them know that he has high expectations; he believes that they can take responsibility for themselves and

that all of them have ideas, thoughts, opinions, and interests worth writing about. Bruce has faith in his students, and through genuine encouragement and respect, he is turning out enthusiastic writers who are willing to put effort into improving.

Bruce further communicates his respect for and faith in students through his teaching methods and assignments. Because there is freedom within all of his assignments, writing becomes personal and not just another grueling task. He also allows students to develop their own writing processes within certain guidelines, thus fulfilling the need some may have for structure while still allowing for individuality. Because both the topic and the process belong to them, the student writers thrive.

Three other invaluable methods that Bruce uses in his class are daybooks, freewrites, and portfolios. The daybook and freewrites fulfill the need for consistent writing, and both allow the student to take some risks. The portfolio allows for risk-taking as well. When a student knows that not every assignment will be graded, the anxiety level is significantly lowered. Students who come to the Center from classes that use portfolios are much more willing to try out new writing techniques or explore new ideas than those who come from classes that use more traditional grading procedures. Because the portfolios are usually not due until mid-semester and again at the semester's end, there is plenty of time to explore and revise. Final editing and proofreading can be done after the higher order concerns are addressed, thus giving both process and product the proper amount of time and attention.

All of Bruce's teaching techniques communicate to the students one very important message: He wants them to succeed. Because of this, he encourages them to use all resources available, including the Reading/Writing Center. He does not, however, single out less experienced writers, but

rather invites all students to visit the Center right from the start; no one feels pressured or forced to come, only encouraged. This gives a clear message that all writers, no matter what level, need readers and feedback during all phases of their writing.

Several teachers from courses other than composition have had success in encouraging their students to use the Center—Dr. Warren Mason, Dr. Robert Miller, and Dr. Stacey Yap, to name a few. Many of them, like Bruce, start out by visiting us themselves to discuss ideas and concerns and follow this by inviting us to visit their classrooms. These collaborations have been valuable learning experiences for all involved: professors, writing consultants, and, most importantly, students. We look forward to doing much more collaborating in the future.