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WRITING AND READING COMMUNITY LEARNING

Collaborative Learning among Writing Center Consultants, Students, and Teachers

Jim Ottery
Jean Petrolle
Derek John Boczkowski
Steve Mogge

Columbia College is located in Chicago's South Loop, which is a rapidly gentrifying commercial and residential downtown area. Columbia has been an anchor in the South Loop for three decades, and with its student population of nine thousand it is recognized for the opportunities it provides to young men and women who aspire to careers in the arts and communications. While it graduates talented artists who go on to "author the culture of our times," as the school's mission declares, it also graduates, and too often fails to graduate, fledgling artists and future employees in communications fields—students who may not author their culture, but who nevertheless punctuate the culture with the understanding that the arts should flourish with widespread, unlimited access.

Columbia College, Chicago, recognizes its commitment to the arts as a democratic undertaking. To that end, Columbia has always had an open-admissions policy, enrolling any students who wanted to pursue their ambition, regardless of portfolio, and regardless of high school GPA and college entrance test scores. However, despite more than three decades of open admissions, it wasn't until the mid-1990s that Columbia College, in response to its low retention rate, began offering developmental courses or even assessing students' reading, writing, and math abilities. By 1997 it was becoming apparent that assessment and developmental courses were making a positive difference, but more needed to be done to help Columbia's underprepared college students succeed. A blue-ribbon panel was formed to study the school's open-admissions policy and its consequences for the school.

After two years, the special commission, still unable to reach a definitive “thumbs-up or thumbs-down” decision on the school’s open-admissions policy, offered a surprising compromise: the creation of the summer Bridge Program for students who were deemed underprepared for college. During the fall semester of 1999, the developmental reading and writing faculty, along with the director of composition, created much of the curriculum for a summer 2000 Bridge Program.¹ In this program, students with high school GPAs of 2.0 or lower participated in a five-week intensive program with writing center consultants and writing and reading teachers.

The Bridge Program was comprised of students, teachers, and writing center consultants who met for three hours per day, three days per week, with up to fifteen students in each class. Six tutors were chosen for the three sections of Bridge—three males and three females, all undergraduate students or recent graduates. During the writing skills session, students worked most often in a computer lab, drafting and revising essays, doing online peer evaluation workshops, and so on. The class was divided into four groups, with a teacher or a writing center consultant working with each group. Thus, groups of three or four students each had the full attention of one writing “expert.” Once a week, the writing center consultants led class discussions as teachers conferenced one-to-one with students regarding their class progress. In large-group discussion, if the students were “stuck” on a question of understanding or interpretation, consultants would volunteer their knowledge and then discuss how they arrived at what they had talked about. In smaller groups, the consultants became teacher/facilitators in their own right.

In this distinctive learning community, writing center consultants, working as tutors, facilitators, mentors, and teaching assistants in the classroom, played a pivotal and significant new role. The consultants aided the Columbia College faculty in fashioning an “intensive-care” learning community experience for Bridge students, a way of helping students to establish a successful college identity. Equally important, working with consultants provided unique opportunities for faculty members to reflect on and revise their pedagogical approaches. This chapter reflects the central role played by the writing consultants in the Bridge Program and reveals how invested collaboration among consultants, students, and teachers constructed a model community of learners.

THE CONSULTANTS' ACADEMIC FUNCTIONS

As a result of their experiences as tutors in the writing center, the consultants were well prepared for the Bridge Program students. However, the learning community model, which allowed for “continuous help,” meant that there were new factors for them to manage. Most significant, they were now “on location” in the writing and reading classrooms themselves. All of the consultants found the chance to work in the classroom a welcome, exciting, and rewarding break in routine. While both Joe and Ben asserted that at times trying to ply their skills in the classroom was more difficult, as the classroom did not afford the privacy of the cubicles in the center—and, indeed, both retreated to the center after class with students who desired more one-to-one tutoring and a more focused ear—the consultants often found the group setting advantageous. Dana, for example, noted that whereas tutoring in cubicles in the center was “immediate,” that immediacy could sometimes seem “stifling” because students felt as though their role in the give-and-take of tutoring required rapid response. Dana said she enjoyed the environment in the classroom, where the students needn’t feel “on the spot,” as they could defer to the group when trying to work out a problem.

However, this change in territory also prompted a change of their role. Being a writing consultant in the writing center meant striving for peer status (which was moderately achievable in the neutral ground of the writing center); in the Bridge classroom, where the students knew the consultants were meeting with the teachers each day, no one could reasonably assume a peer relationship. Thus, the consultants described their roles in many terms: “model student,” “class mentor,” “sympathetic listener,” and, out of a defiance to labeling, just plain “Julie.” Julie saw her active listening in the class as a kind of active teaching. She contrasts her classroom practice with her work in the writing center, which she describes as exhuming knowledge the student already has: “Observing students learning put me in a different seat, viewing the learning process in a totally different angle. I wasn’t merely sucking out the knowledge most students who visit the center already have.” Julie felt that being involved in the classroom meant she was helping to shape the students’ creative minds. Sharon also felt more like a teacher than a writing consultant: “We helped plan the day in the morning, we led discussion groups, and we circled the room, helping people individually.” As a matter of fact, Sharon, Dana, and Ben saw this experience in the Bridge Program as a step toward a teaching career.

At the same time, the consultants were asked to follow along with the work the students were doing in class. They had to complete the reading, be prepared to discuss it in class, and write in their journals. "I learned along with them," Julie offered, explaining that the tasks became more manageable when the students saw how someone else did them. The modeling also helped the consultants become better resources. Whereas in the writing center, the consultant finds it impossible to be familiar with the subject matter of every student assignment, as Dana noted, in the Bridge Program, doing assignments along with the students empowered the consultants to guide students through activities.

One foot firmly planted in the teacher and student camps (Sharon saw it as traveling between two different worlds), the consultants provided an important link in the functionality of the Bridge classroom, a link with the purpose, as Dana described it, of "community building." Not quite instructor, not quite student, the writing consultant stood between the "two worlds," becoming perhaps the human evocation of this bridge of learning.

Notably, the consultants had opportunities to confer with the class instructors directly, in contrast to their more lengthy process of writing session reports. Working and meeting with instructors and the program coordinators offered tutors a chance to affect procedure and pedagogy, as they were able to provide the instructors with information about how the students were reacting to the class. They were also able to discuss personal issues pertaining to the students, issues consultants might feel reluctant to put into the writing session reports. The consultants were heartened by the fact that the faculty for the most part sought their regular feedback.

However, consultants had mixed views toward their weekly meetings with faculty and administrators. Some felt intimidated by the "professionals" and held back their observations. Joe even wished he had not been privy to such meetings, as he felt he was betraying his camaraderie with students in the class because he was asked to weigh in on their standing as potential college students; he said, "I don't like deciding the students' fates."

Overall, however, the Bridge Program experience left a lasting positive impression on the consultants. While the slightly higher pay the program provided them and the feeling of "slight privilege" offered "material" rewards, the consultants felt that just as important was the program's contribution to their professional development: it taught them to be better consultants.

THE CONSULTANTS' LISTENER FUNCTION

The Bridge Program at Columbia was designed in part to raise our retention rate which is low, even for an urban, nonresidential, open-admissions college. Being an open-admissions institution serving a commuter population poses significant challenges to us in our mission to educate students and prepare them for careers in arts and communications fields: to those students whose high school experiences contain nothing to make success in college a likelihood, how can we offer the possibility of change, the possibility of a more satisfying educational outcome? The Bridge Program was designed as a strategy for doing this: helping students to reverse the tide, to chart a fresh course.

Thus, one of our central goals was to reexcite students about learning and strengthen the skills we assumed were lacking. Surprisingly, few of the Bridge students had any significant skills weaknesses, certainly no more so than many successful students have. Instead, what these students had were histories of conflict—inside school and out—that had left them quite distracted from the possibilities of learning, bereft of any really nourishing sense of their own talents, and discomfited, wrapped up in a feeling of *unbelonging* and not “fitting.” A number of them wrote quite well; some placed out of Composition I and had the option of entering Composition II directly. Bridge writing instructors realized quickly that, whereas they had prepared to cultivate invention, arrangement, revision, and sentence-level skills, their more important task involved *enfranchising* students *as* students—as readers, writers, thinkers, time managers, capable doers.

This process of helping students with histories of failure see themselves as capable students is far more abstract and mysterious than talking about paragraphs or sentences, especially since the space of the classroom is not a therapy session or encounter group. Somehow, while remaining focused on the practice of writing and reading, the Bridge instructor needs to bring to the classroom and conferencing a kind of presence with an attention to students that *says* (without saying anything), “You’re bright! You’re capable! Your past experience with education may have been flawed, but you’re actually *just* the kind of person who can read, write, think, graduate from college, and make your way well in the world!” All committed teachers do this—whether consciously or unconsciously—but in a Bridge Program, it seems impossible *not* to make this central to the educational mission.

The process of enfranchising students—of contributing to the alteration their self-concept—amounts to a kind of witnessing function that teachers, other students, and consultants fulfill. In fact, many of the consultants who served in the Bridge classroom considered their informal interactions with Bridge students—their listening, advising, and personal sharing—to be their most significant contribution. In the Bridge classroom, consultants play a crucial social role that teachers could not appropriately play. Consultant Julie Shannon, for instance, reported that she and many Bridge students “became instant friends” and that “some of the students . . . still come to me at the campus with their questions about their classes, or registration, [or] financial aid” (e-mail, 24 July 2002). In such informal ways, consultants often served as friend and mentor at once, giving the students a social foothold in a bewildering mass of new information and personalities that comprise their first-year experience. The friend/mentor role also gave Bridge students another forum to share the high school struggles that led to their spotty academic histories and inclusion in Bridge. Consultants served an important listening function as students told the stories that could help them raise their own awareness about where they had been and where they wanted to go.

Mary Rose O’Reilly, in her book *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*, suggests that students can be “listened” into existence, into stronger senses of self (1998, 16–21). There’s a simple, powerful dynamic at work in listening intently to a student that helps that student see him- or herself freshly. During our time together in Bridge, students told such stories in the process of responding to Ron Suskind’s *Hope in the Unseen* (1998)—a chronicle of an African American boy’s journey from a DC ghetto to graduation from Brown University—stories about their own epic quests for success in school; their own epic descents into underworlds of family trauma, peer group troubles, substance abuse; their dearly won heroic comebacks, of which attending Columbia College was the latest. They read about educational experiences, wrote about educational experiences, spoke about educational experiences, all the while piecing together a narrative explaining what had happened to them in school, and what could be different this time around. Listening intently—through attentiveness during class discussion, through careful responding on drafts, through student-directed conferencing, through e-mail and phone conversations, and through student contact with consultants—somehow enabled the teaching team to create a hospitable space for a student’s unfolding.

Almost all the consultants, when asked to reflect on their experiences teaching in Bridge, ranked listening as a number-one priority. Sharon said, “My relationship [with students] was partly that of a sympathetic listener and then partly that of an advisor. . . . There were a lot of people [struggling with their identity] who just needed someone to listen to them, and then *what* they revealed through their writing and art once they felt [listened to] was amazing” (e-mail, 24 July 2002). Another consultant, Joe, also reported being useful to students in his capacity to listen, especially since his own background includes a victorious struggle with challenging learning differences. Joe wrote: “With the hardships of having a learning disability myself, I understood their feeling of embarrassment when it comes to being involved in a ‘special program’ like Bridge. While I didn’t announce my learning disability in front of the class . . . I was able to encourage selected students on moving forward in education even if they suffer from a problem learning. Their eyes would light up when they heard that someone with a learning disability was able to succeed in college” (e-mail, 24 July 2002).

Sharon reports in an e-mail that another writing center consultant, Julie, similarly struck by the centrality of listening in the consultant/student relationship as a result of her experiences in Bridge, wrote an essay for one of her classes about “how listening, collaborating, and observing [are] the three main components to tutoring” (e-mail, 24 July 2002).

The kind of listening that occurred throughout the Bridge Program takes time. By sharing responsibilities with other teachers and especially with the consultants (who read about educational experiences, wrote and spoke about their educational experiences, all the while piecing together a narrative explaining what happened to them in school, and what made it different for them when *they* found success), intensive listening became our most important teaching tool.

THE CONSULTANTS’ TEAM-TEACHING FUNCTION

Teachers are usually alone in their classrooms—alone in their successes and alone in their failures with students. This professional isolation, unless mitigated by outside opportunities for exchange, makes it difficult to perceive one’s own pedagogical idiosyncrasies, appreciate one’s own strengths and weaknesses, evaluate objectively one’s own effects on one’s students. In addition, the teacher-student ratio in the single-instructor classroom makes it difficult for even the most skillful writing teachers to expand their relationships with their students beyond the students’

writing within the context of the class. With students at risk of failure or attrition, this lack of time and energy for developing holistic relationships with students can seriously jeopardize an instructor's opportunity to help a struggling student bring forth the resources necessary for academic success. In structuring Columbia's Bridge Program as a team-teaching, consultant-supported learning environment, we turned teaching into a more public activity, making the Bridge Program an unusual learning opportunity for *teachers* and consultants as well as for students, and securing much-needed time for intensive contact with our students.

The team-teaching environment, in addition to enlarging the time and space of contact between instructor and student, enlarges contact between instructor and consultants, who intern help "Bridge" the time and space between teachers and students. This environment creates an extraordinary and rare professional development opportunity. When developing a syllabus, planning class sessions, responding to writing, and assessing student growth in collaboration with others, one's pedagogical assumptions, logic of sequencing, and teacherly priorities become more openly articulated and subject to revision. The colleague-to-colleague feedback is indispensable. The feedback from our classroom mediators, the consultants who have become our teachers' aides, is a bonus.

Most of the consultants commented on their role as mediators when they gave feedback about their Bridge experiences. Sharon wrote, "The tutors sort of went between both worlds, and explained the teacher's assignments to the students and the purpose of working on them, and explained some of the students' feelings to the teacher." Suggesting a Foucauldian-panoptical dimension to the mediator role that instructors acknowledge but didn't intend, Julie wrote about her experience: "We were sort of like secret agent spies who interviewed the students and kept their thoughts and concerns in mind to tell the instructors" (e-mail, 24 July 2002).

As Petrolle explains, the mediator role played by consultants enabled her coinstructor and her to make changes in their plans and mode of presentation quickly enough to respond to the constantly evolving and sometimes unpredictable needs of struggling students. When Petrolle is alone in the classroom, she may realize communication breakdowns and logjams too late to change an approach to facilitate better learning outcomes. Accordinally the consultant, Joe, is right when he compares instructor perceptions with consultant perceptions, and notes that, "Due to our different observations [of] students, we noticed different things.

We were able to collaborate together on how to help the students succeed” (e-mail, 24 July 2002). Consultants often noticed signs of student struggle that an instructor missed, or identified a shortcoming in his or her approach: a failure to explain something that was mistakenly considered obvious, a slowness to realize that certain students were not completing assignments, or an overestimation of what was possible to achieve in the short span of five weeks.

In addition to acquiring an additional ear to the ground, one develops as a result of consultant support in the classroom the healthy self-consciousness of the observed. No matter how self-reflective an instructor tries to be, the privacy of the public space of the classroom can breed a degree of complacency. To teach in the light of another colleague’s observation, and in light of observation by the consultants—who are half student/half teacher—to teach in the light of observation is to observe oneself teach.

In sum, the benefits of the community approach to teaching and learning extend to both students and instructors. In the team-taught, consultant-supported environment, struggling students benefit from expanded opportunities to be seen and heard by supportive and experienced companions on the journey toward academic and professional success. But instructors benefit from heightened visibility and contact as well: the enlarged and reconfigured community of the team-facilitated classroom offers greater insight into one’s public teaching persona. Greater insight, of course, offers possibilities for greater effectiveness. O’Reilly also suggests that a key ingredient for effective teaching and learning is an atmosphere of intellectual “hospitality”—that is, an atmosphere in which students are invited in, welcomed, and made comfortable in a realm of ideas and communicative strategies (1998, 8–11). The spaciousness and variety fostered by team-teaching methods helps the Bridge community cultivate this atmosphere. It is our hope that this atmosphere will have the same effect on retention that hospitality usually has on any warmly received guests: they visit again and again and again, until they no longer feel like a guest, but like they are at home.

CREATING AN “INTENSIVE-CARE” COMMUNITY WITH STUDENTS, CONSULTANTS, AND TEACHERS

In Ottery’s classes, students write a weekly journal that they e-mail to him (thus, an “e-journal”) in which they reflect upon their college experience. The purpose of the exercise is to get them to articulate what goes

well for them in and out of school (or not so well, as the case may be) during the week, so that they may be able to internalize their strengths and shortcomings and adopt behavior that identifies successful college students. The information the students provide also helps him as a teacher make adjustments in the classroom to enhance the chance of success for the group or to intervene with a student on a one-to-one level if necessary.

E-journals from the summer Bridge session of 2000 and 2001, as well as spring 2002, confirmed that the problems that most of these students had in high school often had little to do with their literacy skills and more to do with social situations that placed them at risk. So it was not surprising that in this program designed to provide the space, time, and *personnel* to begin to create socialized identities of successful college students, students chose most often to write about how important that “abstract and mysterious” yet “enfranchising” intensive care was to their sense of well-being in the program and in their futures at Columbia College. The consultants’ presence and development of academic and social relationships with students indicates that such a presence is essential on location in a classroom that turns underprepared students in transition into college students who have a real chance to be successful.

Almost all of the students echo comments like those from Nia and Tony, who wrote about “meeting people” and “getting to know more about them” as being what was working best for them in the program (e-mails, 27 August 2000). For many of these students, “meeting people” did not come naturally or easy. One student wrote about shyness connected to feelings of insecurity that led to near deep depression: “A lot of the time I feel as if I’m the lowest thing on earth. . . . I do my best to ignore this feeling, but it’s very hard, it makes me afraid, and it makes me angry. . . . Nobody knows how it feels to be me” (e-mail, 2 September 2000). Ten days later, after making a new friend, he writes: “So I think I finally got the hang of talking to people. . . . All through High School [*sic*] I was so shy and I couldn’t figure out why, I wouldn’t [*sic*] never start a conversation with someone unless they talked to me first. . . . See this [Bridge] experience helped me to build confidence in myself and maybe I’ll start talking to more people and get out of my shell (e-mail, 12 September 2000).

The intensive practice of two consultants and two teachers working with rotating small groups in class allowed students to provide their own “intensive care” to and about themselves and other students—these students had “histories of conflict” that prevented them from feeling as

though they fit in anywhere, in school or out, and thus became academic underachievers at best.

Anthony, another student in the summer 2000 program writes, "I've made some new friends and I just keep making more. I don't have to hide my true self or sense [sic] what I say" (e-mail, 27 August 2000). "[S]chool is becoming [sic] my social life" (e-mail, 3 September 2000), he writes, indicating that a new identity based upon being a successful college student is forming.

In one of her e-journal entries, Nia affirms the value of classroom experience being about "personal relationships" as much as it is about teaching and learning content and also as "interaction between persons." She writes that she is happy to feel like learning in school "instead of outside of school" and attributes this new attitude to her feeling that "meeting people was great, but now getting to know more about them is even better" (e-mail, 12 September 2000). Another student writes of the importance of being accepted for who he is, a relief because he came from a "narrow minded" town that condemned people for differing lifestyles (e-mail, 22 August 2000). He continues later in the same e-mail: "The reading and writing program is another one of the key factors of this program. Through our discussion, we get to see each individuals [sic] outlook on the reading, just because we all read the same portions of the book, doesn't mean we all think the same about it (e-mail, 22 August 2000).

Students in the summer of 2001 continued to make similar observations about themselves and the program. Leilani writes, "This week I feel a little better about the people I am around. I guess I'm learning to be myself more, and I'm starting to adjust to the amount of time it will take to get all my work done" (e-mail, 2 September 2001). "I've learned to give people more credit for their abilities," notes R. E. (e-mail, 4 September 2001). James builds on that theme by writing: "I think the one main thing I learned about myself is that I can become a social success, and still work hard for school. I think I learned that others can do this as well" (e-mail, 4 September 2001).

The intensive-care Bridge learning community created the time and space and opportunity—the hospitality of home—to help students learn, as Justin did, "that I have a lot inside of me that I didn't even know I had" (e-mail, 17 January 2002). As Jean notes, the constant classroom presence of writing center consultants allowed us what some might consider to be "the luxury" of fulfilling our *real* roles as teachers in facilitating the

discovery of hidden potential and the desire to learn, even as we taught some of the skills that students require in order to take advantage of that potential and desire.

It will take many years for us to realize the statistical success (or failure) of the intensive-care learning communities comprising the Bridge Program in the first years of its existence.² But the numbers are encouraging. Ninety percent of the students who volunteered to join and successfully completed Bridge were retained through the spring of 2001 compared to 76 percent of the entire first-year class. The figures for the summer of 2001 might be considered somewhat less encouraging: 75.5 percent of those Bridge students mandated into the program were retained through the spring of 2002 compared to 79.6 percent of the entire first-year class. Still, the program's accomplishment is substantial if one keeps in mind that Bridge students are selected according to criteria that indicate that they are the least likely students to succeed in college. Statistics aside, however, what the consultants, teachers, and students themselves have said and about the program provides a clear picture in words of intensive-care, on-location, learning community success.³