
8 The Fantasy of the “Seamless Transition”

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Janet and Mike have been arguing about teaching for over five years now. Janet, trained as a teacher educator with an expertise in the teaching of writing, and Mike, trained as a rhetorical theorist with experience as a writing program administrator, have taught courses and participated together on conference panels about what writing can and can't do. What follows is the beginning of another argument: is it possible to provide a seamless transition from high school to college writing?

Janet: I met Mike in the winter semester of 1997 at the University of Missouri–Columbia. I was in my first year of graduate school in a Ph.D. program in English education, and I had signed up for Mike’s Rhetoric and Pedagogy of the Holocaust course, a graduate-level seminar in rhetoric and composition, a discipline I had chosen as a support area on my program of study. I was still a little unsure about my future success in graduate school and more than a little intimidated by my university professors who all seemed so smart, and Mike was no exception. I was fascinated by the reading and discussion in the class, and I was pleasantly surprised by the emphasis Mike put on teaching—not only a concern for how we, his students, were experiencing his course, but also a concern for how undergraduate courses about the Holocaust might most effectively be taught. Mike even allowed the final seminar paper to take the form of a course plan that would devise and lay out a writing course based on Holocaust texts and the idea of Holocaust representation. Of course, being a former high school teacher and a current graduate student in education, I took Mike up on his offer. I created a course plan for an intermediate university-level writing course that revolved around the reading and discussion of Holocaust fiction, poetry, memoir, film, and history. To my surprise, Mike asked if I wanted to implement the class the following fall. I accepted with much excitement, and we began planning to teach English 120, Writing the Holocaust.

Mike: Janet was one of two graduate students from English education in the graduate seminar, and the two of them together really held my feet to the fire of teaching, particularly the teaching of writing. That's why I wanted so much to give Janet a chance to teach the course, with me if possible: I wanted to see whether the theoretical foundations of writing would bear out in practice, and the course Janet proposed would allow us to test this. She paired an interest in pedagogies that worked, from her experience teaching high school, with a critically acute sense that even if something worked, if it didn't originate from a sound position—call it epistemology if you like, or call it a sense of how writing hooks onto the world, in Eugene Garver's term—we shouldn't be doing it. This was an especially important issue in this course. We had thirty-eight students who were "prepared" as writers in high school and by the compulsory first-year writing course, but who were put profoundly ill at ease when asked to wrestle with difficult questions and take positions on controversial issues. Through teaching this course with Janet, I became more than just passingly interested in how high school and first-year writing both does and doesn't prepare college students for the writing they're likely to do both in the academy and outside of it.

Janet: Since that class, Mike and I have collaborated on several teaching and writing projects. Our mutual respect for the other's knowledge has enabled us to learn from and with the other. To date, Mike and I have co-presented on five conference panels or presentations and co-written two essays (including this one). One topic of discussion to which we often return, whether officially on a panel or over drinks afterward, is writing pedagogy. Mike and I have expressed some basic differences in pedagogical philosophy over the years, although our thinking has also influenced the other in positive ways. I know that my beliefs about teaching have changed due to Mike's influence. I often, for example, argue for student-centered pedagogies, pedagogies that privilege student choice and risk taking. Mike, while not resistant to these ideas, sees them in a different context: a rhetorical context. Mike's emphasis on the language of argument and rhetoric is sometimes hard for me to swallow, perhaps because I was not trained in classical rhetoric or perhaps because the language seems so inaccessible that I can't imagine using such an approach with adolescents. At the same time, Mike and I tend to balance each other: when I argue for a "safe environment" for unencumbered student expression, and Mike argues that writing is an ethical act that requires taking a stance, we often find a middle ground that balances safety with rigor, or what could be called my brand of "social epistemic expressivism" with Mike's "social epistemic rhetoricism."

As Mike noted, a recent topic of discussion between us has been how to prepare high school students for college writing. At the fall 2000 NCTE Annual Convention in Milwaukee, we presented as part of a roundtable panel (along with two other educators) called “Toward a Seamless High School-to-College Writing Curriculum.” One of the things we discovered during this presentation is that “seamlessness” may not be an appropriate or realistic goal. This isn’t to say that progress can’t be made, however, or that communication between high school teachers, teacher educators, and university writing faculty can’t improve student writing skills and subsequent academic success. But how should we approach this conversation? How can secondary and university writing teachers best communicate about college writing?

Mike: What, exactly, is “college writing?” Depending on which first-year writing director you ask, you’ll get a variety of answers. I’ve now taught at four different colleges, each with the same stated mission—to prepare its students for the intellectual work of the world and to do it in a way that stresses the inquiry over the answer—and yet “college writing” at each couldn’t have been more different. At one, writing was seen as the accurate communication of ideas, and the pedagogy was straight out of the Royal Society; at another, writing was seen as the expression of an individual’s relation with the world, and the pedagogy was informed by a constructivist-flecked expressivism that could have come straight out of a self-help manual. One reason the seamless transition from high school to college writing is a fantasy is that there’s no such thing as “college writing.”

Another reason is that, as I’ve seen from my own experience at state-sponsored research-oriented universities of between 17,000 and 41,000 students, not all colleges are the same. They *don’t* have the same mission, in part because their students come from remarkably varied backgrounds. It may be appropriate to use Corbett’s *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* in a university where most students won’t have trouble understanding what an enthymeme is or the difference between induction and deduction; it may not be appropriate to do so with students whose high school English teachers didn’t assign any writing, or with students who speak a language other than English at home or with friends. Andrea Lunsford’s assessment of the changes that have occurred in the demography of the first-year college student—changes wrought by vast material, cultural, and ideological changes in notions of literacy, education, and writing—accounts for those students who make it to college.¹ But there exists an equal number of students who don’t go on to college (and there are smaller numbers who do but who

are woefully underprepared by elementary and secondary institutions) who complicate the idea of the seamless transition: does the fact that they don't make it mean that teachers aren't doing their jobs adequately?

Janet: That's a good question. As a former high school English teacher and a current teacher educator, I often think about how best to prepare secondary school students for life after high school. I want my current students, preservice high school English teachers, to know how to facilitate student growth and learning and ease the transition of their future students into college, technical education, the world of work, or whatever path they may choose. Of course, this is a huge instructional task. I find myself trying to teach something about which I'm unsure anyone can give definitive, one-size-fits-all advice. To make matters more difficult, my students, about to embark on their careers as English teachers, *want* me to give them such definitive advice. Semester after semester they ask, "How do I motivate my students to write?"; "How do I get students to revise and not just respond to my corrections?"; and "How do I grade and evaluate student writing in the fairest, most just, way?" These are tough questions that I can (and do) address with my students—but give definitive answers? Only in my dreams! The home and school lives; socioeconomic status; and racial, ethnic, and gender identities of secondary school students are so varied that it is difficult to know how any one class or student will respond to instruction. In addition, no common future awaits these students, for their futures will vary as greatly as their present lives do. We know that not all will attend or complete college, for example. But what will they do instead? The answers range from technical school to a life of crime.

Mike: Well, then, let me talk about the question of transition for those students who do go on to college. My comments question the notion of seamlessness because the first-year curriculum we've just implemented at Wisconsin shows some ragged seams. That is, it demonstrates what sorts of things are *not* learned in high school, or maybe what sorts of things are learned there that are made more complicated once students get to college. Nevertheless, what holds high school and college writing together—and what holds it together in our curriculum at Wisconsin—is understanding argument and invention as ethical acts: that in writing, we create (for better or worse) the future in which we're fated to act.

First, why rhetoric? Or, given the rise of postprocess theories founded on constructivist models of thought or on studies of culture or

literacy, why would we want to resurrect this old-fashioned term that, in the wake of the 2000 presidential election, sounds like another term for the spin that results from contested ballots? In fact, far from being a catalog of style, or a formal system of language and thought sucked dry by most textbooks (including some good ones), rhetoric is simply another term for argumentative discourse. If being rhetorical is what we have to be in the face of a contingent world—a world ruled not by the laws of nature but by human behavior that is often unpredictable even when the humans in question like and understand one another—then argument is how we make sense of those contingencies. By argument I don't mean the kind of disagreement a high school student has with a parent or sibling; it doesn't involve shouting or name-calling. Argument is the instrument people use to probe, in a principled way, one another's statements about who they are, what they know, and how they understand the circumstances in which they live and communicate with one another. Rhetoric is finding the available means of persuasion in any given case; argument is what you do once you've found them. To argue, you not only need to know something about the given case and about the people with whom you're arguing, but you also need to use that knowledge to change the nature of the case and the people involved.

Janet: I'm not so sure that the principles connecting high school and college writing curricula need to be explicitly rhetorical, though I don't believe they're necessarily exclusive of rhetoric. Regardless, I have specific ideas about what I think should be included in a high school writing curriculum and the philosophical/theoretical principles on which an effective curriculum should rest. I believe, for example, that students and teachers should understand writing as a process of inquiry. Many English education texts include discussions of writing (and reading) as a process of inquiry, stretching back to John Dewey in the 1930s, moving through the work of Emig and Berthoff in the 1970s and 1980s, and culminating in contemporary texts such as George Hillocks's *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice* (1995). Inquiry can be analogous to "critical thinking," "analysis," and even "argument." When applied to the teaching of writing, a process of inquiry includes the following stages: development of interest in a topic; exploration of this interest through reading, talk, and prewriting; crystallization of a question or issue to be explored; drafting of a text; discussion of text with peers and instructor; revision; asking new questions; revision again; editing; and finally sharing with an audience. Of course, writers could revise, discuss, and reformulate questions and texts indefinitely, until they have to stop

because of time or audience demands. The point is that inquiry is a thinking process in addition to being a writing process. That is why the discussion and definition of topic sentences, paragraph structure, thesis statements, and the like can be troubling. These terms, and often the modes of teaching them, imply that there are discrete bits of knowledge about writing, facts that are applicable to any writing process or task, that can be learned in isolation from a real writing project and real inquiry.

Mike: But what you've said sounds a lot like rhetoric, or maybe more specifically, argument. Argument involves taking a position on a topic or subject on which reasonable people may disagree. This statement has several implications. One is that ideally writing is not merely expository. Describing the position you take on abortion, say, or on whether English should be the country's official language doesn't help you engage or argue with someone who takes the opposing position. The research paper, the bane of first-year writing teachers, is a case in point: laying out a thorough description of what Napster is (to use an example I've seen recently in writing classes at Wisconsin), or what the legal debates surrounding it have been, is great fun. But (and I know this from experience) knowing those positions, or even how cool the technology is, doesn't help if you're not willing to explain why you think it's a good idea for this technology to proliferate. In order to take a position on an issue about which reasonable people disagree, a writer needs to understand the foundation of the argument, the more general claims—what Toulmin called “warrants”—to which all parties have to agree in order for the argument to proceed. Argument involves widening the intellectual context in which arguments are made, and that means giving writers an opportunity to explore not just the “opinions” and “facts” of the case, but also where “opinion” and “fact” bleed into one another depending on which party in the argument you're listening to. Making an argument means not just laying out what you know about an issue (going to the library, mining your own experience), but also finding out what your interlocutor knows and figuring out what common ground you share, what assumptions bind you together, and how opinion and received facts are shaped (and not just “found”).

Part of the problem is that “audience analysis” of the writing textbook variety often devolves into dreadful tautology: the answer to the question of who might be the audience for an essay on the presidential election in *Time* magazine is often “people who read *Time* magazine.” Knowledge, in other words, is built in communities that share assump-

tions, but those assumptions often go unexamined. Sometimes those assumptions are products of a culture or a discourse, but sometimes they're not. Sometimes those assumptions are the products of conditions or civic circumstances that aren't reducible to knowledge. It's one thing to know the demographics of the group likely to read *Time* magazine, or to vote for Ralph Nader, or to be affected by certain kinds of advertising campaigns; it's another to see beneath the language, the discourse, and the arguments to get a glimpse of the structures of the polis that gives those arguments shape. One place where Richard Rorty's pragmatism falls down is in his insistence that language goes all the way down—that there are no material foundations we can access without the mediation of language—and that by changing the way people describe things, we can change circumstances. We may be able to change how people see the abortion debate by asking them to investigate how that knowledge is shaped; but given the choice of what to do in the face of an unexpected pregnancy, the material constraints placed on single mothers—the scarcity of abortion clinics, the dynamics of one's family, the dozens of people holding placards in the street—have palpable but often unreasonable effects, effects that shape what can and can't be argued. Argument is important because it forces writers to understand how what we know sometimes butts heads with circumstances that seem beyond our control, and it forces writers to consider not just audience but also the real circumstances that constrain audiences and the civic communities in which they live and work.

My last point is that argument is inextricably tied to ethics. Something high school students successfully take away from their English classes is that clear, critical writing helps them analyze and interpret literature successfully. What's less clear is whether students understand what good this ability is outside the school or classroom (short of getting them into a good college). If we understand ethics as the analysis of one's circumstances and the ways in which those circumstances determine what we can do and how we can act, then every argument has ethical consequences, consequences that may not be precisely what the writer might have imagined.² Recognizing that individuals live in a polis, in which all members are responsible for the welfare of all the others, means that one understands some constraints as inexorable and beyond one's control. Taking and arguing a position requires that you know how your fellows may arrive at the same, or a very different, position and how what you advocate affects members of your own community and—perhaps more profoundly—those outside it. In other words, it requires an ethical orientation toward others. Now, in some

cases, you're just not going to change another person's mind for the same reasons that it's exceedingly hard to change the law of gravity or to challenge some scientific paradigms: there are circumstances—and other individuals—that act in ways you can't account for beforehand. One result of this recognition is that the writer needs to be humble even when he or she is the most certain: although compromise isn't always required, some things about your audience and about the world you and they share simply aren't easily knowable.

So what does all this have to do with the transition from high school to college writing? What I've just described as the principles of argument meet and constructively complicate the criteria Janet set out for inquiry. First, argument is a mode of inquiry *par excellence* so long as you don't see it as a substitute for wangling a deal or see its aim as "winning." If Toulmin and Perelman have taught us anything, it's that we should understand argument as "a process of inquiry with others," a way of reaching decisions on sometimes difficult issues in ways that involve others on whom those decisions impinge. The formulation of a claim is more complicated than "finding a topic," in that claims involve narrowing a topic of invention to a statement of ethical obligation. Rather than take Napster as a topic—which would involve exploring all of the issues involved, such as its origins, the controversy surrounding it, the differences of opinion on patent and copyright law that have arisen—a writer should situate the topic much more locally and take a position on one of those more local issues (Does Napster violate copyright law? Does it involve intellectual property? Do Napster and related software programs outstrip the law?). Exploration and research would then involve gathering data to support the claim, data that aren't simply cumulative but that require an ability to sort the relevant from the irrelevant, the related from the unrelated. But it also involves understanding how data that support a claim counter to the one chosen need to be integrated into the argument and argued against. To know this, students also need to understand the concept of "warrants," the more general claim that underwrites the more particular one they've chosen to make. So to argue that Napster is illegal because it violates copyright law, students need to know how copyright law works and what it protects, because the warrant "the violation of copyright is a violation of law" needs to be made part of the argument and needs to be researched—and understood—as such. As students do so—as they explore not just the Napster issue but also the warrant on which it is founded (issues of copyright law and the idea of intellectual property), their claims may change, their emphases may shift, and the positions

they take may become more complicated or fraught. What is most important here is that students realize the complexity of the intellectual process of inquiry, that it involves more than fact-finding, and that as the process continues there's an equal chance that their claims will become strained as that they will become stronger.

Janet: I agree. Central to an understanding that writing is a process of inquiry is the fact that writing is also often used for critical purposes. I don't mean that students should write through a critical (i.e., theoretical) lens, such as feminist or Marxist, but I do mean that students should be critical, and they should write analytically about topics they want to investigate. Writing critically necessitates writing about topics important to the student writer's life and sociocultural, ethnic, or family realities. Robert Yagelski's *Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading the Social Self* addresses the concept of "local literacies," or literacy acts that are relevant and meaningful to the individual student. Viewed this way, literacy becomes more than a set of skills to be learned; it becomes "at heart an effort to construct a self within ever-shifting discourses" (9). Yagelski resists oversimplification of the act of writing as learning discrete subsets of skills such as punctuation, paragraph structure, and spelling. Instead, he exposes literacy learning, which includes reading and speaking as well as writing, for the culturally determined and institutionally defined experience that it is. Instead of simply being a process of decoding and encoding symbols, literacy is at the center of human development and essential to intellectual and ethical growth.

Critical writing is often a component of critical pedagogy, introduced to Western educators by Paulo Freire and elaborated on by Ira Shor, Peter McLaren, and Henry Giroux, among others. Critical pedagogy is often called pedagogy for the "process of freedom" or for the intellectual (and sometimes material) liberation of students. Students are asked to examine their own subject positions as well as those of their peers and think critically about social and political issues that affect these positions. They are asked to be active thinkers and to use writing (and other literacy acts such as talking and reading) as a tool to facilitate the critical examination of their world. The goal is to become more adept language users and also to become more aware of their place in modern society and how to actively respond to inequities within it. Amy Lee writes in *Composing Critical Pedagogies: Teaching Writing as Revision* that critical pedagogy "suggests that having a political, critical conception of one's teaching will necessarily produce liberatory effects in the classroom that, in turn, will produce better citizens" (6).

What does teaching for liberation have to do with learning to write? Lee states that being a “better” citizen is dependent on being critical about dominant discourses and being able to produce discourse in response that expresses these critical views for others. I would go even further to say that the very act of writing, and to a lesser extent talking, helps would-be critical citizens understand issues of ideology and oppression that permeate society and affect their role within it. This increased understanding leads to more appropriate interactions with fellow citizens of the world.

Let me provide an extended example to illustrate my point. Pretend I am teaching Homer’s *Odyssey* to tenth-grade students in central Indiana. After they’ve read the work, I want students to write an essay that explores and analyzes a theme or issue from Homer’s text—make an argument, if you will, a literary argument about the epic poem. Instead of giving a blanket assignment that might ask students to “discuss Odysseus’s hubris and how it leads to many of his problems” or “defend *The Odyssey* as prototypical of the ‘hero quest’ genre,” I ask students to comb through their reading journals or literature logs for possible topics of interest. With appropriate prompting, students could find some kernel of an idea worthy of their continued exploration. Then I could ask students to relate this chosen topic first to the text (*The Odyssey*) and then to their present life experience in some way. This series of connections ideally forms a sort of triad of personal response, textual analysis, and sociotextual criticism. If a student chooses to write about the story of the Cyclops and how it seems to represent Odysseus’s struggle with his own arrogance, then he might see the relation between that and recent election rhetoric and the refusal of Gore to “concede,” hostile letters to the editor in the *Lafayette Journal Courier*, or perhaps even his own stormy relationship with his father and the discussion they had last night. The point is that even the most critical, the most analytical, of essays can become even more intellectually stimulating if it integrates the author’s intellectual and emotional experience with the text at hand. These two points on the triad tend to produce the third point: true criticism or evaluation of the text in relation to other texts, other readers, and other events in the world.

Mike: What Janet has just described is the process of intellectual inquiry. But I want to make something of a disclaimer here. Maybe because we’ve all taken the process (and now the postprocess) pedagogies of the last thirty years to heart, we don’t think much about this part of the

work of writing. While it's important to teach students that one begins with prewriting and moves to the articulation of a point, gathers material, drafts the material, revises it in a community of peers, and so on in a recursive process, teachers in high school and often in college frequently superimpose these steps onto the content or aim of the course: the final paper(s). I see the most insidious result of this superimposition in first-year college writing classes as the “participation grade”: students dutifully making changes in their papers, or following up on suggestions from peers or teachers for further research, or following peer review guidelines to make marginal notes on one another's papers, with their papers changing barely at all. The dutiful completion of these tasks—revision—is meant to earn that portion of their total grade, often a fairly small portion, that might bump their borderline grade (the one based on the final draft) up to the next rung. One of the advantages of seeing writing as argument, as a process of critical inquiry that moves students from claims and data to warrants and grounds, is that students don't see “the process” as something forced. In fact, it's something they have to do in order to successfully argue a point. Of course, this is sometimes excruciatingly frustrating for students, who often see finding a topic and writing a paper on that topic *as* primarily expository and the research process as fact-finding. And yet what I see time and again as the director of a writing program is that the most successful teachers—and by that I mean the teachers whose students seem to be most engaged in the intellectual endeavor entailed by argument as displayed by their papers and their other writing—are those who encourage students to see the blind alleys and the contradictions they find as they explore the rough terrain of claims, warrants, and grounds as opportunities to change their minds or to engage in spirited disagreement with peers or teachers.

Janet: I think we both agree that a writing process needs to be more than isolated tasks that students complete; it needs to require critical thinking and be intellectually rigorous and socially aware. But can this kind of intellectual and discursive work take place only when writing the academic essay? What about asking students to write in other genres? Many secondary English teachers routinely ask their students to write not only expository prose but also stories, poems, plays, and more. Often, first-year college composition courses emphasize expository or argumentative writing to the exclusion of creative genres. I don't believe this exclusion is because university instructors don't value creative

writing; I think it's because it is a commonplace that most students will spend the majority of their college and professional lives writing non-fiction, expository prose, and consequently instructors are preparing students more effectively if they ask them to write primarily in this genre. While this may or may not be true for individual students, more bothersome is the assumption that argumentative writing teaches a mental process or intellectual skill that other types of writing don't. Tom Romano has gone so far as to recommend the "multigenre" paper, a combination of many genres, including but not limited to autobiographical narrative, exposition, poetry, fiction, drama, and even drawings. Romano defines the multigenre paper as

arising from research, experience, and imagination. It is not an uninterrupted, expository monologue nor a seamless narrative nor a collection of poems. A multigenre paper is composed of many genres and subgenres, each piece self-contained, making a point of its own, yet connected by theme or topic and sometimes by language, images, and content. In addition to many genres, a multigenre paper may also contain many voices, not just the author's. The trick is to make such a paper hang together. (x)

This "hanging together," I believe, is where critical thinking, or inquiry, can occur. The multigenre paper in its totality must have a point, a theme, or an argument. It is not just a collection of unconnected writings placed together in no particular order. It must say something in its completeness larger than the individual parts could achieve and larger than any one genre could accomplish alone. Often, such a paper speaks not only to the logical side of an argument, but also to the affective, aesthetic dimension. It uses and appeals to both brain hemispheres. Consequently, Romano asserts, multigenre papers are more persuasive, more powerful, and more effective than traditional, single-genre ones.

Many college students may very well have to write far more expository essays than any other kind, unless they choose to be creative writing majors. But I don't believe that creative genres necessarily ignore analytical thought, and I don't think that every kind of writing students do in high school has to explicitly prepare them for college. Creative writing can be intellectually rigorous. A story, a poem, a one-act play, all should say something, should have a point that is created and reinforced in subtle, difficult-to-accomplish ways: dialogue, character development, description, setting, conflict, and so forth. I admit that at times creative writing is assigned to high schoolers as a kind of "fun activity" with few demands or expectations. Students like to do it, so they actually write. There's nothing wrong with that, of course. At

least they’re putting pencil to page. But thinking back to stories that my own high school students wrote, I can’t say that I encouraged or enabled them to think very hard about them because I didn’t know *how* to teach these genres effectively. These stories were often weak and frustrating for me to evaluate because they fell into two camps: either they went on and on forever with no point and no center of gravity (to use Elbow’s phrase), or they were so short that there was simply no opportunity for any point to be made. When taken seriously and taught effectively, however, creative writing is rigorous and requires much analytical thought, as well as advanced writing skill. Perhaps this is an area of writing instruction teacher educators should explore more carefully. It’s not that creative writing—Britton’s “poetic” side of the language continuum—can’t be intellectually rigorous and instructive about language, but instead that teachers don’t usually teach it that way.

Mike: Much of what I’ve said here seems to work against the multiple-genres criterion, the idea that high school and college writing should not only be argumentative or persuasive, but also expository, imaginative, fictional/poetic. I do think there is a place for any number of different genres in both the high school and the college writing classroom. But these forms of written expression need to be understood in the broader (critical) context that sees writing as ethical action, action that effectively changes how people act to and with one another. The multigenre paper, as described by Romano, is important insofar as it “hangs together” and is interwoven with reference to a theme or topic. More important than having the paper “hang together” is having the student understand *how* and *why* it hangs together and for what purpose. As Janet says, it’s not necessarily the case that creative genres ignore analytical thought; in my experience, though, teachers who deploy such genres often do—partly due to lack of training and partly because students seem to enjoy writing fiction far more than they do arguments since they have been writing fiction since grade school and it comes far more easily. But if we see the task of writing instruction in high school and college as helping students understand the responsibility that writing involves, then any writing task in whatever genre should be tied to a broader ethical problem: how does writing as a creative act have consequences for how I and others live our lives, and what are those consequences insofar as I can determine them? Whether we tie *The Odyssey* to the local newspaper, or freewriting to an essay about politics or economics, seeing the writing as staking out a position is of paramount importance.

Janet: So perhaps the issue is not so much what genre we ask our students to write in, but more how they engage with their writing topics in whatever genre they have chosen or been assigned. Many high school and college writing classes, for example, use peer groups for response to writing. I also know from talking to teachers at all levels that peer response is one pedagogical practice that creates headaches. Often teachers don't think students are giving valuable feedback to each other—instead they are chatting or talking about spelling and commas. But if students are instructed in methods of peer review and collaborative work and are held accountable for this work, group collaboration can teach valuable lessons about writing and the intellectual process. Experiencing your ideas as received by a real audience, and then asking that audience questions about this reception, is invaluable to the writer.

Lev Vygotsky, the Russian linguist and psychologist, wrote much about social interaction with peers and how such interaction can lead to language development and cognitive growth. His theory of the “zone of proximal development” (see *Thought and Language*) asserted that learners learn through association with and instruction by those developmentally more sophisticated. In other words, there is a “zone” of possible learner growth, and teachers (or peers) can “bump” students to the uppermost point of this zone through modeling and direct instruction. If, however, we attempt to instruct to a point more advanced than is contained in this zone, the students will see no benefit. The same is true if we teach below the student's zone of growth because in effect we are teaching them what they already know. Consequently, working with a peer who can give feedback that is even a trifle more sophisticated than the student writer's perception can help the writer grow.

To reiterate, one question high school teachers (and those who educate them) should ask is “How can we better prepare students for college writing?” Answers to this question are many and varied, but one thing is clear: high school and college students are readers and writers of texts on a daily basis. Textual arguments surround and affect their world at every turn, on billboards, on television, on the radio, in novels, in the newspaper, and even in their school textbooks. The texts students read are becoming more diverse, more varied, and, dare I say, more subversive all the time. High school teachers, university teachers, and teacher educators must keep pace with these changes and continue to expand and complicate their understanding of rhetoric and writing to make it applicable to the present and future lives of students. In short, the complexities of our assignments, the ways we evaluate student writing, and the processes of writing we ask students to engage in must reflect the increasing complexity of postmodern communication.

Mike: What this increasingly complex postmodern situation suggests—or, in terms I prefer, what this complicated rhetorical situation suggests—about writing and critical inquiry is that it involves more than just collaboration, and it means that we need to move beyond Vygotsky's idea of the zone of proximal development. To see writing as primarily argumentative is to see it as an ethical act: writing doesn't just say, it *does*. To engage in an argument means to engage in a process of changing how you and other persons live their lives. The argument about Napster might be seen as a good example: to propose the imposition of early twentieth-century copyright laws on a late twentieth-century technology is to advocate whether and how information changes hands, and may involve broader implications not just for whether you can download music onto your hard drive, but whether you can download intellectual property protected as belonging to someone else, so that even visiting a Web site and printing what you find there might land you in jail, or at least incur a hefty fine. To make an argument like this means arguing with individuals who don't want to land in jail, or who like a marketplace of ideas that's free and unencumbered. To make this argument means taking your interlocutor seriously and writing your argument so that he or she will take you seriously. The other writers with whom one collaborates in a writing classroom aren't just other sets of eyes to catch faulty reasoning or errors the spellchecker missed; they are members of a broader community who potentially have a stake in the issue on which the writer takes a position.

One way to play out this ethical dimension of argument is to understand audience as something more than a demographic set of like-minded individuals who will read an essay and react to it in stereotypically predetermined ways. This involves bringing the extralogical elements of argument to the surface, and one of the best ways to do so is to see the ethical or policy implications of a proposed course of action in terms of their effects on real individuals. This can be done through collaboration in the classroom by providing criteria for peer review that don't concentrate on the structure of the essays brought to the group but on their implications: To whose advantage, and to whose disadvantage, will it be to see virtual music (or texts) as private property, and in what ways does the writer's argument imply an answer? Who should be punished for the proliferation of music—the software designer or the poor schmuck who's caught downloading a Green Day CD? Questions like these might get at the more visceral, less "logical" problems inherent in a position, and may lead to questions of knowledge even though they don't start from them.

Another way to play out the ethical dimension, though, is to worry less about collaboration and to concentrate instead on *consequences*. This means seeing audience as something real and greater than its representatives (members of the peer group) in the classroom. One way to make the focus on consequences palpable is to bring an argument to an actual, flesh-and-blood audience that may (and in some cases may not) be the one intended by the writer. Part of the work involved will be to identify a community or polis different from one's own and to begin to make contact with one or several of its members. A point of entry here might be classmates who themselves are members of a community not readily identifiable for "school" purposes (a social or religious organization, an ethnic or cultural affiliation, or a gender identification are only a few that readily come to mind). Students can also be encouraged to find campus or community groups whose constituents might entertain an argument on an issue close to its mission or interest. But regardless of how one identifies members of a community with whom to argue, the idea here is to understand that the consequences of an argument are both real and often not what one would expect if one were simply to map them rationally or enthymematically. Members of an audience outside the classroom are constrained not just by the "marketplace of ideas," but also by the scarcity of resources; the religious, cultural, and political ideologies of workplace and family; and the prejudices and fears that sometimes get overlooked in "intellectual" debate. A pedagogy of argument makes real not just the rational but also the irrational element of discourse that makes itself evident when the writer stakes out a position, and it allows students to confront the irrational critically (if not to ameliorate or dissolve it). Such a pedagogy is critical not (only) in the sense that it is politically motivated, but (also) in the sense that it sees language as having effects that are often invisible to the logical apparatus of argument but palpable and very real to those with whom the writer is arguing. It's a critical pedagogy that sees audience as polis rather than classroom and that sees language as having material and ethical, and not just "meaningful," effects.

Janet: Will a "seamless transition from high school to college" writing ever happen for any student? Possibly not. And we may not want to smooth out all the bumps, even if we could. Being pushed out of one's comfort zone and challenged intellectually can be frightening but also conducive to personal growth. So while seamlessness may not be a realistic or desirable goal, I do think that working to increase "readiness"

for college writing is quite valid. The question is how to achieve this increased readiness. Perhaps step one is improved communication between university and high school writing teachers, which is, of course, one of the goals of this essay and of this book.

While I'm still not completely convinced that the language of rhetoric and argument is the best way to frame a high school writing class, I do understand Mike's point of view that it can be the most effective way to teach a college writing class. Regardless, I think the criteria I've discussed for a high school English class can be compatible with such a college curriculum. For the record, I don't think high school and college writing (or writing classes) will ever, or should ever, be exactly the same. They are different classes, taught in different contexts, to students at different cognitive and developmental (not to mention emotional) levels. To conflate the two would be unfair and inaccurate. Devising high school and writing curricula so that they are compatible, however, seems only logical and desirable for our students who are planning to attend college. So maybe that should be our goal when high school and college writing teachers communicate: an increased sense of compatibility, not the creation of a false seamlessness between our respective curricula.

Mike: That's right; seamlessness is probably the wrong metaphor. It's a metaphor that comes from the anxious feeling college and high school writing teachers have that the best they can do is give their students a working vocabulary for how language works and a set of practices that will come in handy down the road. So while it's true that Janet's criteria are valuable to the first-year college writing class too, they may not be as easily transferable as we've made them seem. In fact, one could argue that though the criteria are the same, the way they're "operationalized" is quite different. This operational difference is possibly unavoidable (and even desirable) since the high school and the university are obviously diverse kinds of institutions, and teachers in each are instructing students at different developmental and intellectual levels. One principal difference is this: students in the first-year college classroom are introduced to how fraught argument is, how necessary it is to inquiry but how difficult it is to use, particularly if seen as a way of forging consensus. The political notion of argument laid out in the second part of this essay, based on the criteria outlined in the first part, is a lot messier in practice than it sounds (if our first-year writing program is any indication), though it's just this messiness that makes the college writing classroom unique.

And yet in spite of this caveat, we both see in these criteria, and in their practice in a course on argument, a way to tie high school and college writing curricula together. The most critical ingredient is for teachers in both places to understand writing as an ethical activity and as a way to change the circumstances of those who engage in argument, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. It's important for students to understand that what they do when they write is make an argument—take a position among other positions—and that by writing they are establishing themselves as members of a community, a polis, a discipline. It's sometimes not an especially lovely realization for students—in fact, it can be seen as risky to step out on a limb. But to view writing this way is to better prepare students for the kind of principled and critical work they will face not just in their high school or first-year college writing classes, but also as members of a democracy.

Janet: Mike's and my collaboration, as well as our continuing conversation, has been infinitely helpful to me as a teacher educator. It has required that I articulate what I believe about teaching high school writing and preparing new teachers. Mike's point of view has also often prompted me to rethink my positions, and such rethinking has had positive effects on my teaching. Therefore, I would encourage others to collaborate in similar and even more extensive ways. Recently, I've learned of a project in the Milwaukee area that encourages high school and college teachers to meet and discuss teaching on a regular basis. Called the Milwaukee Area Academic Alliance in English, it bills itself as

a gathering of teachers of English from throughout southeastern Wisconsin who come together periodically to share ideas, information, problems, and possible solutions concerning the teaching of English. Established in 1988, the Alliance now serves high school and college English teachers and middle school language arts teachers in a six-county metropolitan Milwaukee area. (Maris)

The alliance organizes and presents three programs a year about teaching and invites teachers and administrators from all levels to attend. The university provides funding, mostly for mailing and copying costs. During the 2000–01 academic year, workshops were offered based on the theme Teaching Matters and included presentations about censorship and gender equality. Maris states that forty to ninety teachers regularly attend the workshops from a variety of secondary and postsecondary institutions.

Parks and Goldblatt describe a similar program in the May 2000 *College English*. Called The Institute for the Study of Literature, Literacy,

and Culture at Temple University, it is described as “an alliance of university, public school, and community educators.” The goals of the institute include sponsoring “courses, seminars, workshops, and lectures designed to bring together the educational community surrounding Temple University” (593). Like the Wisconsin alliance, the institute offers informal presentations and workshops that allow secondary teachers, English education specialists, and university English faculty to communicate about their respective concerns and even work together to tackle literacy problems and issues in their community.

Mike: This conversation, which began in 1997 and continued through the 2000 NCTE Annual Convention and this essay, has convinced me that we need to do a much better job of fostering collaborations between secondary schools and universities. When I queried a department administrator about this kind of collaboration—involving workshops for school and college writing teachers, occasional joint professional development opportunities, discussions about curriculum, and so on—I was told that it wasn’t my job as the first-year writing administrator to foster these collaborations. Leave it to the College of Education, I was told. What this means is that in order to understand how a “rhetorical” college writing curriculum might work better as a continuation or complication of high school writing curricula, I need to work through other organizations: NCTE, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and National Writing Project sites, and more informally (I was about to say “surreptitiously”) through meetings with local district teachers, teachers in the College of Education, city school administrators, and parents of both college and high school students. As a writing program administrator, all of this seems mightily daunting—after all, the demands on my time are as great as those placed on other teachers and administrators. But to return to that seminar in 1997, what impressed me then—and what continues to impress me now—is the wealth of practical and theoretical knowledge about writing, argument, and ethics that high school writing teachers have and that is practically invisible to many if not most college and university writing teachers and administrators.

Janet: Alliances and institutes (both institutionally sanctioned and “surreptitious”) such as these are examples of institutional collaborations that can occur among literacy educators at various levels. Even if your community or institution does not yet have such a communicative forum in place, there are ways for secondary-university conversations to

occur. Collaborative writing, research, and conference presentations, for example, can examine and report on successful communication and encourage other educators to look beyond the four walls of their own institutions and take note of the system of education in which their students will function throughout their lives as students. The professional collaboration between Mike and me is one example of a positive cross-disciplinary and cross-contextual working relationship that can serve as a model for other educators who are seeking such communication. I'm not implying that dialogue such as ours, a snippet of which we've shared in this essay, is a cure-all for an often-tense working relationship between high schools (and teacher educators) and university English departments. Of course problems remain, and just as our students may never experience a seamless transition from high school to college writing, there may also never be a seamless working relationship between English education specialists and university composition specialists. But the argument Mike and I have made that seamlessness in the transition from high school to college writing may not be the most desirable path to seek applies equally well to communication between our disciplines. While mutual respect is essential and seeing eye-to-eye gratifying, part of what makes collaboration and conversation useful is the tension, the articulation of differences that we continue to hash out in stimulating, intellectual exchanges.

Notes

1. I'm thinking of Andrea Lunsford's essay, "The Nature of Composition Studies," in *An Introduction to Composition Studies*, edited by Erika Lindemann and Gary Tate (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), but could just as easily cite James A. Berlin's work in *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984), Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), or Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* (New York: Free Press, 1989) for different examples of the changes in writing education and their consequences.

2. I'm using the term "ethics" in a way perhaps different from Aristotle's. If Aristotle used ethics to refer to a systematic notion of how one should act in accordance with the good, I'd revise the term slightly to suggest that ethics is a way of describing the tension between acting as one believes will accord with others' beliefs, and at the same time knowing that those others are completely irreducible to oneself. In other words, ethics refers to the vertigo associated with the thought that even with the best systems of knowledge available to humans (yourself and the others with whom you're trying to make policy decisions or even just mundane ones), there's an irrational element to human behavior, and to the language we think we can use to domesticate behavior to

knowledge, that we simply can't account for, and that makes us and others behave in ways we can't account for. So ethics is at once a system of behaviors and actions available to us *and* a description of what happens when we forgo all but one possibility and go down that road—a very dark one—without so much as a flashlight. Ethics is a precarious notion, which is what I think Perelman would suggest. See Geoffrey Galt Harpham's very smart and readable essay “Ethics” in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin's *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1995).

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