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26 July 2010

Writing for Publication in a Community College Developmental English Class: A
Reflection on a C. W. P. Mini-Grant Supported Unit

Introduction

As a Connecticut Writing Project Teacher Consultant (S.I. '09) and an
Assistant Professor of English at Quinebaug Valley Community College, I
applied for and received a mini-grant of five hundred dollars to support student
publication units in my developmental English classes. With the money from the
grant, I purchased a Hewlett-Packard Color Laserjet Printer, ink, and paper to do
small, in-house press runs of class anthologies for two basic writing classes at the
college. In this paper, I will explain my rationale, my process, and conclusions
related to the grant-supported projects.

Background

As in other open enrollment colleges, many of our students test into
developmental English, math, or both. Approximately 30% of Quinebaug Valley
Community College students have to take at least one developmental course.
Typically, students must earn a minimum of a "74" average in these courses to
move on to the next course in the sequence, which, depending on where they
place, may be the introductory 100's level course or just the next course in the
developmental sequence. Students who fail to earn a "74" may take the course
again; when students earn higher grades, their previous grades in that course are
deleted on their transcripts. In English, the most basic developmental course is

English 073: *Academic Reading*. In the spring 2010 semester, the next course in the sequence was English 063: *Writing: Introduction to the Essay* (which has since been retooled as English 086: *Fundamentals of Writing*). The last course is English 093: *Introduction to College Reading and Writing*. Ideally, students acquire

fundamental skills in the subject areas as they progress through the sequence and into freshman level coursework. However, there are a number of stumbling blocks along the way. Students become stuck as financial aid refuses to pay for retaking courses, yet the task of improving skill areas is so ambitious that often one semester of work in any particular area is just a beginning. Furthermore, very few students who begin in more than one area of developmental coursework will ever obtain a degree or certificate from the college.

Retention and success for developmental English students has become a major focus of the English area at the college. My experience working with academically challenged students as a high school English and special education teacher, plus my knowledge of the body of research on teaching writing, strongly suggested to me that class publication units might be effective, if not essential, avenues for engaging students in the writing process, and, by extension, skill development. It has long been established that while emphasizing process over product is an important aspect of teaching writing, student publication as a product outcome is a very powerful part of the process, one that helps ensure deeper student engagement all along the way. In 1988 Kathleen Cotton summarized the research in this way: "Sommers and Collins (1984), Smith (1982), Glatthorn (1981), Wesdorp (1983) and other investigators have found that student motivation and achievement are enhanced when student work is "published" for a larger audience than the teacher. Classmates, other students,

parents and community members are among the potential audiences for students' written work" (5). In the two decades since that neat summarizing, theory and practice have only reinforced this position, especially since the media and tools of publication have evolved so dramatically with the advent of the wikispaces, blogs and other forms of electronic publication. Today, as teachers and learners we are exploring what student publication using a variety of technological tools and in a variety of media (Adams and Hamm 33).

For this particular grant, I considered the possibility of creating a webpage or on-line document, but ultimately decided to purchase a color laser printer to support units that would culminate in a tangible print publication for a number of reasons. First, many of my students in developmental English are in economically precarious situations, which often means, among other things, that their access to computers and the internet at home are either limited or non-existent. If the benefits of student publication have to do with student pride and the student's ability to share his or her pride with others, then such a limitation can be a tragic flaw for the project. Finally, a surprising number of the students have limited computer skills --- they would be stretched over the course of the unit just by producing honed word documents, sending emails with attachments, downloading and uploading images, selecting, cropping, etc.

I taught the publication unit in two sections of Introduction to the Essay, one of which was at the main campus in Danielson, and the other of which was at the Willimantic Center. The majority of students on both campuses tend to be from working class backgrounds, an attribute that is even truer of the developmental courses. The Danielson campus, however, is predominantly white, while the Willimantic Center attracts from an area with much more racial

diversity and a high Latino population. As enrollments have increased, so have

the capped class sizes; the Danielson section began with 22 students, and the

Willimantic section began with 23 students, an over-enrollment of one. As a

result, the door to the classroom in Willimantic was impossible to open all the

way, and many students could only move out if the whole row moved out before

them. Fortunately (or unfortunately), the class sizes typically shrink allowing for

slightly more breathing room, and this was true for this class: 10 students on the

original roster would eventually stop coming to class. Eight students would

complete the course with the requisite "74" average; in Danielson, thirteen

students would successfully complete the course.

I announced the class publication assignment - an anthology of the

student's best writing -- on the first day of class, including a brief description of

its scope in the course syllabus, and

reminded students of it frequently so as to keep the publication as a motivating

goal as the course developed. I reinforced this by showing them models of

previous class anthologies. Also, I made revision and reflection integral to every

formal writing assignment and had the students keep a working portfolio of drafts,

final copies and revisions, so that each student would build a body of work they

could draw upon. The progression and character of assignments in each section

was roughly the same; daily writer's notebook (journal) entries from various

prompts and free-writing exercises typically led to, or reinforced, essay

assignments in rhetorical modes of increasing ambition, culminating in a

persuasive writing assignment. One crucial difference, however, was that I had

organized a service learning component for the Willimantic section. The

Willimantic students received a class release period as well as class time devoted

to, the completion of their service learning. Students signed up to work for three

hours at the Covenant Soup Kitchen or with the Windham Area Interfaith Ministry. They recorded their observations closely in guided journal entries and wrote about their experiences in a descriptive essay and in a final persuasive letter. The persuasive letters were addressed to local politicians or the editor of the Willimantic Chronicle around issues of hunger and homelessness, and required that the students ground their arguments in two sources: one reliable print source or webpage, and their own experience. The persuasive essay assignment in the Danielson class could not be organized around an experiential unit, although many students did choose to use personal experiences to ground their arguments; instead, they wrote in response to Molly Ivins' deliberately provocative call to ban all guns in her "Ban the Things. Ban Them All."

Process

I kept the process of the class publication assignment essentially the same for both classes. Approximately one month before the final meeting of the semester, I laid out the formal assignment. The students were asked to consider their entire body of writing from the semester, including, the unfinished final persuasive writing assignment, as pieces to consider contributing

to the class anthology. Students could choose essays or even favorite writer's notebook entries and thoroughly revise them so as to make them "as close to perfect as possible." These revisions took place in stages and included teacher and peer review. Furthermore, students had to write biographical statements in the third person for the "About the Authors" section. Finally, students were asked to create some kind of visual image to accompany their written texts (e.g. photos, collages, original artwork, etc.).

Anecdotally, I found that all of my students were interested and invested in this assignment, especially after the scope of the assignment became clear to

them, and they realized that the work they produced for the assignment would be seen by their fellow classmates and fellow classmates' families, but potentially by other members of the school community. Despite the high stakes, I did not receive any requests for alternative assignments, and all students who were still in the classes at that point in the semester ended up contributing to the anthology. Clearly, however, students were not so much motivated by the fear of others seeing their work - a fear I knew to be present in the class and which would manifest itself in other ways during the course of the project - but by pride. Students invariable chose essays and writings that were meaningful to them and with which they had met some success. In some cases, the "success" might have only been encouraging words I had written about the students efforts - they had no high grades from which to choose. This is evidenced in the diversity of writing: a personal narrative about going to the first of what would be two tours of duty for a young marine, a definition of a healthful lifestyle, a description of Casper, Wyoming, a humorous essay on going to church.

The one incident that I am aware of in which fear of sharing work hampered or changed the student publication process happened in Willimantic. In both classes, the students did not seem as concerned about the prospect of having others, potentially even strangers, read their work, as they were about doing whole class critiques.   When one student in Willimantic realized

that we were going to share our work with the class as a whole, he changed his choice of submission. He had originally chosen an essay in which he described his volunteer experience at the soup kitchen. The experience was galvanizing for him, as was his writing about it; as a child, he had gone to the soup kitchen many times with his family to get meals, and they had spent many nights in a local shelter. In order to complete his service learning, he had to confront a part of his

past that he had wanted to avoid. While he was very proud of his essay and had no trouble talking about it with me personally, he could not bring himself to share it with the group. I did not pressure him to do so, of course, and he chose to include a personal essay about his experiences playing pick-up basketball (also a good essay).

A common part of the process for a number of students in both classes involved instruction around formatting documents, cutting, pasting and cropping images, and emailing documents to me with attachments. For a sizable minority of the students, these were skills they rarely used, and I had older students in each class who were still, at this point in the semester, very uncomfortable with creating and sending documents. For a few students, the obstacle was not so much computer skill, but access, either to a computer at home or to internet at home; they had to carve out extra time to spend in the computer lab at school in order to complete the assignment.

In addition to individual efforts, there was work to be done together as a class. There were a number of group decisions to be made. What would the title of the anthology be? Who would be responsible for cover art? Would there be a table of contents? Preface? Fonts? In order to proceed, we first had to have at least a working familiarity with the contents, so all students were responsible for, minimally, reading an excerpt and providing a summary of the submission. From those sessions, we brainstormed, shared suggestions for titles, debated, and voted. Other decisions about the format of the book were made similarly. Again, I provided models that included other class publications, but also professional journals and anthologies.

Assessment

Again, students knew in advance that their graded contribution to the class

publication was worth 25% of the final exam grade, which, in turn, was worth 10% of their course grade. In addition students knew how their contribution grade was broken down out of 100 points: 20 points for workshop preparation and participation; 20 points for visual image; 60 points for essay submission. The total number of points in each category was assigned according to excellent, good, fair, and poor quality. This is the only assignment for which no late points could be deducted, as the completed submission had to be in on time if the student was going to be included. There were no late submissions.

After cutting and pasting the student documents into place, formatting, writing prefaces for each book, I printed the documents on the Hewlett-Packard CP2025N Color LaserJet Printer acquired with the five hundred dollars from the Writing Project Mini-Grant. The books were collated and bound with the department binding machine, and I distributed them to the students on the day of the final exam.

The Final Products

Both the Willimantic section's book, *Future Growth*, and the Danielson section's book, *All About Us*, had handsome color covers and color graphics throughout, which was a big improvement over previous black and white efforts or books that had a color cover but were restricted to black and white in the contents. Again, while process must be privileged over product in any good writing pedagogy, the paradoxical truth is that nicely done student publications as final products can be powerful motivations for student engagement in process. I made enough copies for each student to have two, plus copies for the front lobbies.

Conclusion

Having easy ability to publish in-house short runs of high-quality, color class publications is a boon for teaching writing to students who are struggling to

acquire confidence

and skills. I hope to share publication units with other instructors of

developmental writing, especially those who may feel initially that such efforts

take too much time away from direct grammar instruction.   There is also room

for improvement. While I am now convinced that my initial decision to use grant

money to produce a tangible, traditional text was absolutely correct, I also think

that perhaps the text might be converted to a pdf file that might also be accessed

through the web. I also imagine that the combination of print and electronic

publication might be utilized for much smaller assignments along the way -

creating postings of polished developmental student writings on the physical walls

of the campus or on the ethereal walls of cyberspace; I imagine these small

publications can encourage and embolden students along the way, always

pointing them back towards writing not just as painstaking process, but as

meaningful and fruitful process.

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