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AUTHOR Warner, Mary
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses writing partnerships consisting of preservice English teachers who are in the Composition (or Grammar) course for the English Teacher, a 300-level course, and students in Written Communication 101 or 102. The paper presents a concept of writing partnerships which does not merely replicate collaborative learning since the partnerships are formed between students in upper division courses and those in beginning writing courses. The paper offers the rationale and goals for these partnerships as well as some logistics for forming and assessing their success, and mentions that the concept will adapt to middle and high school settings. The paper states that the distinct advantages to establishing writing or learning partnerships in institutions with colleges of education include: opportunities for preservice teachers to have one-on-one encounters with lower level writing students, making them more cognizant of the kinds of writing and writers they may meet in their teaching careers; and, opportunities to provide first-year students with potential mentors who can play a major role in retention. Data for assessing the partnerships is presented in the paper from student response in journals and self-assessment of papers submitted in portfolios, case studies of partnerships, and student evaluation forms. Comments from teaching students and Composition 101 students are appended. (Author/CR)

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Writing Partners: Facilitating Learning and Fostering Mentorships Across Course Levels

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Black Hills State University

M. Warner

One thing I realized very quickly when I began student teaching was the lack of "real world" applications in my teacher education program. Many of my classmates often did not see the relevancy of what we were learning; I felt the same at times. But when I became the teacher, it didn't take me long to realize that my 8th grade students were no different; they needed real world applications as well.

My best experience in college with the real world of teaching English came not from a sophomore or junior field experience, but from the Writing Partners project. Working with a real student for an extended period of time truly showed me the difficulty of correcting writing—especially when the writer believes the piece is good. There is no comparison between working with a real student and studying what it will be like to work with students. Most education classes tell what you will experiences as a teacher; the Writing Partners project allows you to be the teacher and gain the experience firsthand. (Debby Christensen, May, 1995)

These words of a student who took Composition for the English Teacher, a 300-level course for English Education majors, during the semester I initiated the idea of writing partners signal some of its significant advantages.

Particularly for institutions with Teacher Education programs, Writing Partnerships can provide this "real world" experience for future teachers of English while simultaneously addressing some other issues facing the English faculty and the institution as a whole: the paperload, opportunities for one-on-one student conferencing, emphasis on writing as a process integrated with the development of critical thinking skills, and retention. The significant contributions to English education programs, however, are the major advantages and distinctiveness of the Writing Partners Project.

The structure of the Writing Partners Project as it has worked during the first year is fairly straightforward. Students in Written Communications 101 and students in Composition for the English Teacher (or during Spring

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Semester, in Grammar for the English Teacher) are paired up. The pairings are made after obtaining the addresses, phone numbers, and some general background of students in both courses since our particular institution has a large number of commuters and it is important to address as many of the logistical problems as possible. (During the Spring semester one of my students requested her high school daughter for a writing partner. I had not originally planned for this kind of partnership, but the results were valuable, demonstrating in another way that Writing Partnerships have their value precisely because of the reality of the writing contexts. The college student-parent paired with the child-high school student is a fine example of the possibilities of partnerships. During the 1995-96 term, I have allowed a far wider range of partnerships. I did not have the additional case studies from those partnerships at the time of the 1995 NCTE presentation.)

As instructor in both courses, I had also seen a writing sample from all the students and had some initial notion of which students might be the most beneficial matches.

The partners are required to meet four times during the semester; this is a minimum requirement and the most successful partnerships have generally been those who meet more frequently. Ideally, having the four sessions allows for the 101 students to have additional input beyond what the instructor can give or their classmates can give through writing workshops on each of their first drafts. Each partner is expected to do a journal entry about the session describing what was accomplished. Students in 101 are also encouraged to discuss in the one-page Self-Assessment of each final paper any help they have received from their writing partners.

The assessment or monitoring of the writing partnerships comes from students' journals, their self-assessments, student comments throughout the

semester and a final course evaluation which I create myself allowing for a more thorough response than standardized student evaluations; students are not required to sign their names to the final course evaluation, thus those comments included in this paper are the ones cited only as "student comments." A more comprehensive list of the comments is included in the appendix. Though a percentage of the final grade for the course is also determined by these reports on the partnerships, I am well aware of those who have made efforts, but who simply have an uncooperative partner and I can make adjustments. In evaluating the success of the partnerships, I do consider that fact that logistical problems and individual student problems enter the picture and continually ask students to reflect on the value of the idea even if their particular partnership hasn't worked well.

In addition to the kinds of assessment described above, there is some limited statistical data which comes from the diagnostic essays written by 101 students at the beginning and end of the course. Beginning Fall 1994, schools in the state university system of South Dakota were required to provide Supplemental Instruction for writers who might be at risk. A means of identifying these writers was a diagnostic essay written during the first week of classes. These essays were read and scored by members of the English faculty; student essays could earn a rating of 1-4, with one being low. Several sections of 101 had a student tutor, all tutors were upper level English majors, attending the course and serving the students identified as basic writers. My section of 101 did not have a tutor; this was another reason for initiating writing partners. Of the 23 students writing the final diagnostic essay, thirteen improved their scores, six stayed the same and four scored lower than on the initial essay. On the essay written during the first week of the semester, five students scored a 3 or higher; on the diagnostic essay at the end

of the semester, ten students earned a 3 or higher. It is conceivable that this 50% improvement signaled that the course was well-taught; however, the feedback from 101 students, particularly what is included in their self-assessments accompanying final drafts of papers, allows for significant credit to be given to the writing partnerships.

The Writing Partners Project differs from peer editing or other forms of collaborative learning in several ways. First of all, the partners are formed from students of different academic ages/levels--the students in first year composition courses with students in Composition for the English Teacher or Grammar for the English Teacher. Presumably the students from 300-level courses have a more directed focus regarding writing and see the dual purpose of continual development of their own skills as writers and the imminent reality of teaching writing. Thus, even as pre-service teachers their work as writing partners allows them to see the preparedness or underpreparedness of the first year students and as one student from Grammar for the English Teacher expressed it,

It really forces you to face what you know (and don't know) and more importantly, how to take the information you do know and relate it to someone who is struggling with it. For me, it really put into perspective all that I know about writing and grammar and how important it is. When writing comes easy to you and you've always been able to put together ideas clearly in your writing, you don't realize how important that is. Then you meet with someone who is maybe struggling, and you read their paper and are completely lost at what they are trying to say and how to help them, and then you have to go back to all you know and try to figure out how you're going to start teaching it to them. It forced me to know my writing rules and style even better. Hopefully then, my writing partner learned and so did I! I though it was great!

The quotation above obviously has some technical problems of its own, yet the underlying point is clear and replicates the well-known adage that we learn material best as we attempt to teach it to others.

In the writing process, which teachers of writing struggle with nearly as much as their students, we learn best as we continue to write. That premise is the rationale for the writing required of students in both Composition for the English Teacher and Grammar for the English Teacher. It also means that the academically older student has some writing to be reviewed by or shared with the student in lower level composition courses. "Debbie, my writing partner, also helped in revision. She pointed out some good ideas for my weak areas, and also the strong ones. After reading some of her writing, I take her advice very seriously. I personally think that she could become a published writer in the future." Darin's comments here demonstrate how the academically younger student can be inspired by the writing of the academically older student; his words also show something of the way he was validated as a writer by having Debbie let him serve as an audience for her. For the academically older student's viewpoint, Rose Jagim shared these insights, "I consider him my writing partner in every literal sense of the word 'partner.' I don't consider myself a better writer than he is, although we have very different strengths, weaknesses and styles."

Obviously, given most of the evaluation is based on student comment and response, it would appear that there is a lack of "hard data" verifying the value of writing partnerships. Yet much of what the writing partnerships provide cannot be measured in statistics. The notion of mentorships developing from the writing partnerships and the effect this has on retention, which will be explored further later on in the paper, is one such area. Another is the development of the pre-service teacher's style for responding to student writing and methodology for teaching the writing process. The interviews, case studies, or anecdotes gleaned from action research work best

here as they provide a way for the future teachers of writing to articulate what they are learning or have learned. The following, actually a case study description, was submitted in addition to his journal entries describing meetings with his writing partner. It discusses a range of topics that Writing Partnerships introduce.

I met with Kevin yesterday, major disappointment. Kevin had written about a page and a half on his second assignment and still just rambled on with no real focus. He did, however, stumble on some really interesting possibilities. The fact that he didn't recognize them makes them worthless to him, I however, have a couple of really good ideas if I am ever stuck with an assignment.

I see the problem this way. It is difficult to write when there is not only no real interest in the topic, but no interest in the task of writing, period. I have never found a teacher that could make a writing assignment interesting until I found a personal pleasure in the task; even then, to actually sit down and start writing is still very difficult. I understand exactly how Kevin feels. Still he needs to learn these skills and in his case, quickly.

For the sake of discussion, let us assume the Kevins of the world will never be convinced that word "smithing" is a pleasant undertaking; let us also assume, they will never be ardent readers. What are the reasonable minimum requirements for such a person in the field of writing? Then how do we teach the the minimum?

I have worked in the technological field for quite a few years and, to be honest, to be able to write was not really a requirement; that is, in most instances, verbal communication was enough. The writing I did need often did not even require full sentences or any punctuation, just a few loose descriptions of what I did at the time.

Let me say here that Kevin should have come out of high school with better skills than he has, but that cannot be undone now.

Three good paragraphs, minimum requirement: Thesis/introduction, support/elaboration, conclusion/summary. Three paragraphs is short enough so that task is not so daunting that it defeats the student before he starts. When we look at a novel, one page is no big deal, but filling that page, one little letter at a time, is a skill not easily acquired.

I realize schools start out at the simple and progress to the more complex, but, it is also clear that too many students start college unable to write even three good paragraphs. I suspect one of the prime reasons for this is teachers with sixty to a hundred or more students. In the assembly line model of school, which our system is, and may be of necessity, quality control will be limited by what a single teacher can reasonably be expected to do well.

If three good paragraphs is the minimum, then how to get

them is the next question. Again, from my own experience, suggestions on topics, from a teacher, when one is not interested in writing at all, no matter how broad, does not really help inspire the student. Better either limited topics, or, and I believe preferably, topics directly related to subjects the student has in other classes. Even to the extent that one paper be allowed to fill the requirements for two classes. Three good paragraphs on a history lesson could illustrate to the history or literature teacher that the assignment was read and understood. One teacher could grade content, the other, the mechanics.

Kevin, being the first student I've ever had, worries me. I see a little of myself in him when I was his age. There is no real direction there, but, there is sufficient ability to become many things if the task of education does not discourage him.

(Neil Schanzenbach, 10/13/94)

Neil met with Kevin for a half hour weekly throughout the semester; this partnership clearly went beyond the requirement and Neil offered a particular kind of insight, as his comments indicate, which not all partnerships had. Though his commentary is more rumination than expression of or application of theory, it highlights the advantages of writing partnerships for the pre-service teacher. He is able to ask the questions, probe the same problems any teacher of writing experiences, but he and others pre-service teachers are allowed the "real life" situations in the course of their study. The questions Neil asks can easily become topics of discussion in the 300 level courses since his experience is not unique--nor are Kevin's writing problems unique.

There has been some advantage to my teaching both the Written Communications 101 and the Composition for the Teacher courses (or Grammar for the English Teacher as is the case in the Winter semester) since I know the approach to writing I take on both levels and know the students in both groups. During Fall 1995 because I do not have a section of 101, some of the students in Composition for the English Teacher have established partnerships with the students in other instructors' sections of 101. The benefits of these partnerships include furthering discussions with other university writing instructors about writing and the preparation (or lack there of) student

writers have, as well as increasing the opportunities for students in these English methods courses to confront a variety of methodologies and philosophies of teaching writing. In any case, the upper level students need review of a range of concepts from thesis statement to the workshopping process. Above all they need the actual practice in providing both oral and written critiques of peers' essays so they have the "language" and means to articulate their response. They also need to be writing to be consistently aware of the challenges of writing and the value of writing to learn, an concept which fosters a sense of lifelong learning.

In addition to those Composition for the English Teacher students who are working with 101 students, a number of the students are working with high school and middle school students. Shelane Graham is working with a sixth grader who is writing a book. She had her sixth grade partner read a paper she was submitting for Composition for the English Teacher and was happily surprised at the insights he offered her. Another Composition for the English Teacher student who is working with her fourteen year old high school brother is discovering how challenging it is for ninth graders to develop paragraphs.

Once again though, the unique value of the Writing Partnerships among other types of peer-editing or collaborative learning comes from joining students across course levels. Even if students in the upper level courses like Composition for the English Teacher or Grammar for the English Teacher are not chronologically older, they are academically older. Ideally given their specific orientation as future English teachers, those who are academically older bring to the partnerships dual advantages: they have had additional writing experience and they are motivated to learn how to work with writers. "It gives good practice in finding that fine line between

correcting someone and discouraging him/her" is the sense of Roxanne Everhard, a student who worked with a partner during Grammar for the English Teacher.

It is also highly probable, however, that even future teachers of English will not be attuned to all the advantages of serving as a writing partner. Those like Debby, whose reactions are cited at the beginning of this paper, do see in time and as in her case fairly quickly, how important it is to have more and more "live" writing/writer contexts. Pre-service teachers are not significantly different from seasoned ones; the most common response I heard from student teachers as I asked them about their preparation was, "No one ever told me how much time it would take to grade." Implied in this statement is frequently a larger concern, "No one taught me how to respond to writing" or "No one prepared me for the kinds of writing I would get from students." Paraphrasing a notion of Bill Schulz, writing teacher at Rapid City Stevens High School, that we need to view our students as writers who happen to be students, Writing Partnerships provide writers who happen to be preparing to teach, the ability to work with writers who happen to be students.

Some students, more from the lower level courses, may question the requirement of meeting with writing partners. As with many other situations, without the requirement, the meetings might not happen. Comments from 101 students do verify that some do see the value of the project. "It was hard to get together sometimes, but she gave me a lot of help and yet didn't totally cut it down. I think you should keep up this idea. I know it has improved my writing skills lots!" "I think the writing partner plan is a good idea; it gives you yet, another chance to confer with someone on your paper." "There are many advantages in having a writing partner; it's someone to keep you on the right track." (101 students, Fall 1994)

The notion of retention was mentioned earlier in the paper. Many institutions of higher education are not unlike the situation at Black Hills State University which has an open enrollment policy and a fairly significant population of students who are underprepared for some reason. One significant factor that account for higher retention rates is the fact that first year students experience one-on-one contact with a professor or with someone significantly involved in their academic life. Several instances from the partnerships established during Fall 1994 highlight the retention value. In one case Laurie, a 101 student experienced a family emergency. She was supposed to have a draft of her 101 paper peer edited in class and was unable to get that draft in. Laurie called her writing partner, who was able to supply a draft and verify with me, Laurie's instructor, why Laurie could not be at class. In this instant Laurie had identified in her writing partner, an academic and a personal support. Another first year student described her partner this way, "My partner helped me more than I ever imagined she could. I think we built a small friendship for this class...I had a good experience with her and although she helped me more than I helped her, I hope too, had a good time." One additional aspect of the partnerships connected to retention is that they help extend the option for one-on-one conferencing which can become impossible as class sizes increase and as university professors face larger teaching loads. Above all the hope I maintain is that the future teachers of writing by becoming more involved in their own writing and the writing of others with whom their partner will grow in their perception of writing as a means of lifelong learning.

ABSTRACT for
"Writing Partners: Facilitating Learning
and Fostering Mentorships Across Course Levels

The concept of Writing Partnerships does not merely replicate collaborative learning since the partnerships are formed between students in upper division courses and those in beginning writing courses. Writing Partnerships as discussed in this paper consist of preservice English teachers who are in Composition for the English Teacher and Grammar for the English Teacher, and students in Written Communication 101 or 102. The paper presents the rationale and goals for Writing Partnerships as well as some logistics for forming and assessing the success of the partnerships. This partnership concept should be adaptable to high school and middle school settings.

The distinct advantages to establishing writing or learning partnerships in institutions with colleges of education include the following: preservice teachers are given the opportunity for one-on-one encounters with lower level writing/writers; they are more cognizant of the kinds of writing/writers they may meet in their teaching careers; and first-year students are provided with potential mentors who can play a major role in retention.

Data for assessing the partnerships is presented in the paper from student response in journals and self-assessment of papers submitted in portfolios, case studies of partnerships, and student evaluation forms. While this is not "hard data," the advantages of Writing Partnerships are best articulated in writing by the writers involved.

Appendix
Comments from 307 (Grammar for the English Teacher) Students
regarding Writing Partners

"On a high school level this idea would have worked better. Maybe we should have teamed up with classroom partners and helped each other with the response papers."

"I like the idea of the writing partners. I believe the concept is an excellent method for a writing class."

"I [also] think this is a wonderful idea and opportunity (if you could somehow fix the time thing and make it easier to meet). It really forces you to face what you know (and don't know) and more importantly, how to take the information you do know and relate it to someone who is struggling with it. For me, it really put into perspective all that I know about writing and grammar and how important it is. When writing comes across easy to you and you've always been able to put together ideas clearly in your writing, you don't realize how important that is. Then you meet with someone who is maybe struggling, and you read their paper and are completely lost at what they are trying to say and how to help them, and then you have to go back to all you know and try to figure out how you're going to start teaching it to them. It forced me to know my writing rules and style even better. Hopefully then, my writing partner learned and so did I! I thought it was great!"

"The Writing Partner Project is an excellent idea. It is helpful for upper level writers to review beginners' work as a reminder of all the concepts that are automatic and taken for granted by successful writers. This project is good practice for future teachers in that they must explain why writing must have a specific form. The more effective they are at explaining why, the more students will learn."

"I think this is an excellent opportunity for both the 101 student and the 307 student. Maybe one solution would be to have 307 students write less and work with the 101 students more. If meeting with the writing partner carried more weight, perhaps it would receive more attention. One way of doing this would be to have 101/307 scheduled at the same time, alleviating any scheduling conflicts for the students. Of course, this would require different instructors for both classes."

"I did not feel qualified to give constructive criticism on someone's paper because I was not too sure about my own. My writing partner was nice, but I did not really know if I was giving the right advice. I felt a little uneasy about saying too much because I might do more harm than good."

"I think this is an excellent idea (in theory? harder in practice), especially when future teachers are paired with 101 students. Matching 101 students with non-teaching majors may not be as effective and practical.

You talked at one time of allowing time in the 101 class for us to meet with them--I don't know if this ever took place, if so I missed it--but this may help the logistical problems.

Good experience for us as future teachers to be dealing with and helping other students."

"I feel that assigning writing partners is an excellent idea, but few lower classmen want to take responsibility of getting help. Although the older and more

mature 101 student will see the benefits of having a "future English teacher" as a positive move and therefore be willing to cooperate and work together to succeed."

"This was a good idea, but I do not think we should get graded on helping others because of the factors you listed above (partner not wanting to meet much--much inflexibility)."

"The logistics are just too difficult to overcome. Good idea, though, because the real life writing is hard to asses. If the person has a lot of writing difficulty, the task almost seems overwhelming!"

"The writing partners is a good idea. We have gone over this before. But--I think the focus this semester should have been on grammar--not writing; which in this class the focus was more on writing than anything else. I realize that grammar encompasses writing, but maybe the exchange should take place between 101 and 102. The 102 students should have learned enough in 101 to be helpful."

"The best benefit of peer writing partners for 101's is the access to students with higher ability (hopefully) and a chance to get positive criticism from someone other than a teacher. For the upper level student it provides an opportunity to use the skills being developed as future teachers of English."

"I was lucky to get a good kid for a partner. I felt that this part of the course was worthwhile. It gave me a chance to see grammar in context."

Comments from 101 Students (Spring 1995 Semester)
regarding Writing Partners

"I had only one chance to meet with my partner and I thought she was helpful."

"I thought it was a great plan and my writing partner helped out a great deal."

"I could never get a hold of my writing partner but I found somebody else and it was very helpful."

"My writing partner and I became good friends. She helped me and I helped her."

"Well it was somewhat helpful but I could've lived without it."

"It can be beneficial if both people care."

"I'm afraid my partner wasn't much help, she emphasized grammar which is OK, but that's not where I needed the help."

"I guess it just helped to get someone else's point of view on my paper. Especially someone with more writing experience."

"My writing partner was basically just someone to look over my paper. She helped with some obvious things and ways to rearrange what I had. I believe I knew more about writing essays than she did."

"My writing partner helped me "show" more and helped me with grammatical errors."

"Writing partners were also placed in an awkward position. They really aren't that much more ahead in English than we are."

"It seems that it was difficult to get together, because we could never get together."

"I thought that having a writing partner was almost more trouble than it was worth, but getting the point of view of another person could be helpful."

"I did not think my writing partner really helped me. Not any more than any person in the class. You might want to think about pairing up people in the class. Since they know what is being worked on and might be more open once they have worked together often."

Comments from English 306 (Composition for the English Teacher)
Students
regarding Writing Partners--Fall 1994

"The success depends upon whether or not both the writing partners find the exercise helpful. If it isn't, people won't take time for it. I feel like I was successful with one of my writing partners. But it is very individual."

"I also think the idea is a good one. Timing can be a problem. Student commitment can be problematic. I think the lower level students get more out of the process but the higher level students can learn and grow, as well. Helping others write helps you write."

- "Advantages: 1. both get input on a personal level
2. younger students get one-on-one help they may need.
3. clear and more correct writings"

"My partner and I only discussed our writing twice during the semester. Both times were one to two hour sessions. So we got a lot accomplished. We visited at other times, giving encouragement and support. Sometimes that is more important than talking over problems."

"No success with my partner--but overall a good idea. Maybe would be better if we could forego a class period so that we can meet during that time."

"I feel my partner and I were successful because he began to see where his mistakes were, although the vast majority of the credit (about 99.999%) does not belong to me. Ideally, we would have met two or three times for each paper. What worked for us was to exchange papers between classes one day and discuss them the next. It would be great if we could sit in on some of their classes and they ours. I know --another logistical nightmare!"

"Great advantages--enjoyed the give and take. Perhaps there should have been an exact number of time people should meet together--(six times?) And then students would make more of an effort."

Comments on Writing Partners from Written Communications 101
Students
Fall 1994

"Writing partners help, but I feel it should be an optional service."

"It didn't work out good [well] for myself [me] because I was always at work or class etc."

"I personally had problems meeting with my partner. This is a good idea but I think meeting with partners should be optional not required."

"I feel that they are a good thing, but for myself [me] it didn't work. We never made/kept appointments."

"I thought that a writing partner could extremely benefit a student because they are easier to get a hold of when you have writer's block, can't find the word you're looking for, or if a student needs help working through a thesis statement."

"The writing partner was beneficial on the first paper but not as much on the second or third. I think the writing partners should just be for the first and second papers, both drafts of each. By the time I wrote my third paper I have enough practice to see a little more of what was wrong with the paper and corrected it myself."

"It was definitely a help to have someone, besides the teacher, look through my paper and actually know what to expect, or look for."

"At the beginning of the semester it was helpful but as the semester went on it was harder to find time to discuss our papers. I think it should be optional because I know a lot of people had trouble in this area."

"I enjoyed the meetings with writing partners. Sometimes it was hard to connect, but it gave a different viewpoint for a paper, which can only help."

"I think the writing partner plan is a good idea; it gives you yet, another chance to confer with someone on your paper."

"I learned some important things in my writing partner sessions. Some of the things I learned were show more, not tell in the essay; eliminate some of the 'announcing' in the essay, and reduce some of the 'I's' in the paper."

"My writing partner helped out a little but not much. Our schedules had a hard time collating."

"I think it's a good idea, but I don't feel we should be graded on it. There are many advantages in having a writing partner; it's someone to keep you on the right track."

"It was hard to get together sometimes but she gave me a lot of help and yet didn't totally cut it down. I think you should keep up this idea. I know it has improved my writing skills lots!"

"My writing partner and I did not work. A plan would be--have writing partners from the same class where you discuss before or after class."

"I think a writing partner could really help you; however, I didn't benefit because I had some problems with my partner. I guess it just depends on who you get."

"Even though my writing partner and I only met once, she was still helpful. I know that others were very successful."

"I think it is a good idea for the people that have time to do this. And need help writing."

"I think that the writing partners have some definite advantages for freshman English classes. Since I have a good grasp of English and grammar, it wasn't as helpful--but I think the right partner could have helped me more. TIME is a big factor and I don't have any solutions!"

"I found the writing partner plan to be very helpful. It is a good idea."