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AUTHOR Trent, Mary Alice
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ABSTRACT

Human beings are in a constant ebb and flow; transcending boundaries at work and play, they learn, pray, and exist in an interdependent society. Given this reality, many practitioners, from kindergarten to college, have devised various methods of collaborative learning to meet the challenges of an increasingly diverse demographic and ethnographic classroom population. To employ collaborative learning strategies successfully, writing teachers must take on the role of facilitators; they must set tasks that place students at the center of the learning process. Using collaborative learning strategies that are in tune with the theories of the "new rhetoricians" (a focus on the creative, constructive intimacy among texts, writers, and readers) in Louisiana, are Patricia A. Ward, a teacher at a magnet secondary school; Elizabeth Mountford, a fourth-grade teacher; Nancy Romero, a high school English teacher; and Bill Chiquelin, an English/language arts middle school teacher. They are selected as examples of "teachers teaching teachers," in keeping with the National Writing Project philosophy. Ward contends that collaborative writing learning strategies are most effective when students and teachers work together. Mountford believes that students read/write more efficiently in pairs. Romero argues that teachers must build a non-threatening community at the beginning of the year if students are to respond freely and honestly to each other's writing. Chiquelin invites his students to comment on his own work in progress. (TB)

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Mary Alice Trent

Beyond the Comfort Zone: Collaborative Learning and the National Writing Project of Louisiana

1996 Annual 4C's Convention

Milwaukee, Misconsin

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I

If it is true that we live in a global village and that no persons are islands unto themselves, then we live through interaction, multi-levels of dialogue with others, sometimes in collaboration and cooperation, and other times in conflict and competition. However the case, human beings are in a constant ebb and flow; transcending boundaries at work and play, we learn, pray, and exist in an interdependent society. Given this reality, many practitioners, from kindergarten to college, have devised various methods of collaborative learning to meet the challenges of an increasingly diverse demographic and ethnographic classroom population. Practitioners have developed a number of terms to describe their strategies, such as

> writing groups, the partner method, helping circles, collaborative writing, response groups, team writing, writing laboratories, teacherless writing classes, group inquiry technique, the round table, class criticism, editing sessions, writing teams, workshops, peer tutoring, the socialized method, mutual improvement sessions,

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intensive peer review--the phenomenon has nearly as many names as people who employ it. (Gere 1)

To successfully employ collaborative learning strategies, writing teacher must take on the role as facilitators setting tasks that place student writers at the center of the learning process. The four Teacher Consultants, featured in this research, place students at the center of their learning--student empowerment and intellectual liberation through social interaction. Their approaches transcend the ordinary, the traditional classroom environment. Bill Chiquelin and Patricia Ward emphasize that writing teachers should be co-learners in the writing class, while Elizabeth Mountford and Nancy Romero stress that students should engage in group-related activities where writers are responsible for their own learning. In categorizing the theories and pedagogies used by these four Teacher Consultants (TC's) of the NWP of Louisiana, I claim that these collaborative learning strategies are in tuned with the theories of the New Rhetoricians.

II

Using the system of nomenclature cited by W. Ross Winterowd in A Teacher's Introduction to Composition in the Rhetorical Tradition, we can argue that the practitioners discussed in this article model strategies used by New Rhetoricians, who focus on the creative, constructive intimacy among texts, writers, and readers (Winterowd 45). Writers

read, respond, learn, and write together, forming writing communities founded upon trust, respect, and both positive and negative feedback. Writing becomes an intellectually-stimulating social interaction among peers, instead of isolated pockets of intrapersonal thinking. These practitioners study how student writers generate their products. Therefore, emphases are placed on the process, as we will discover with the four TC's cited in this paper.

Unlike the New Rhetoricians, Current-Traditionalists focus more on the products of their student writers. In the words of Winterowd, "Pedagogy becomes text-oriented, as opposed to process-oriented" (31). Abandoning this text-oriented, linear writing style, the four TC's featured in this paper, like practitioners from a number of National Writing Project sites across the country, have developed strategies and theories that place student writers at the center of their learning in writing courses. Writers invent ideas, arrange and rearrange texts, collaborate with each other, revise and edit texts, and so on. Writing teachers who have remained partial to the Current-Traditional approach should not be limited by these theories or the theories of Romantic Rhetoricians.

With less emphasis on writing as a social act, Romantic Rhetoricians argue that writers should rely on their on individual, imaginative, creative act. Thus, Winterowd points out that "Public discourse is devalued" for these writers

(37). However, student writers should learn how to collaborate effectively in the classroom, particularly since the "real world" workplace is both competitive and cooperative in nature. Practitioners who feel secure using strategies of Romantic Rhetoricians should challenge their students to go beyond the limitations of writing as an individual act to include more social interaction. As will be exhibited by the teaching practices of the four TC's in sections three and four of this article, practitioners whose student writers devote a considerable time to collaborative learning use pedagogies and theories more in keeping with the New Rhetoricians.

III

Patricia A. Ward, a 1993 Greater New Orleans Writing Project (GNOWP) Fellow and an English teacher at Eleanor McMain Magnet Secondary School, Grades 7-12, contends that collaborative learning strategies are most effective when students and teachers work together, i.e., teachers learn from students, and students learn from teachers. Ward postulates that teacher-student relationships during collaboration foster productive thinking skills and social skills for functioning in the academy as well as outside the academy. To illustrate this idea, she uses the following analogy to demonstrate the importance of the teacher's role in a collaborative learning classroom. She compares teachers to

> Smoldering coals. . . . [Students] move

> and take with them a vibrant burning coal so that when they get to the next place, they can build a fire and fix the meals and have some warmth. And before they leave from there, they may put all the other coals out. But they definitely are going to take one to start the next fire. . . . [The] teacher is like . . . that piece of coal that ignites and from which the students can build their own fires, can get the spark, and keep on passing it on.

In essence, facilitators plant seeds of inquiry that blossom into knowledge, as Ward descriptively states using the "smoldering coal" analogy. Acting like "that piece of coal," Ward has implemented two strategies for collaborative learning, where student writers correspond with students from other schools in the city of New Orleans.

Recalling the effectiveness of the Pen Pal strategy of collaborative learning, Ward states that at the beginning of the school year she and a colleague from an area school in the city pair off their writing students. Before letters are mailed to their pen pals, Ward's students conduct reader-response sessions in class. During peer group sessions, student writers edit for grammatical and mechanical errors, offer suggestions to strengthen vocabulary, and critique the overall effectiveness of the letters before mailing them. Ward's student writers correspond frequently with their pen

pals on school-related topics or topics about life in general. At the end of the school, the two classes meet to dialogue in person during a "brown bag" luncheon (Ward).

Transcending boundaries in her classroom, Elizabeth Mountford, a 1993 Fellow of GNOWP and a fourth- grade teacher at New Orleans Free School in New Orleans, LA, contends that collaborative learning strategies are essential for learning to write well. Based upon her observations, students read and respond more efficiently in pairs instead of groups: "Students do a great job sharing ideas on what to write about and helping each other when they are stuck" (Mountford).

Working with younger students has proven to be successful for Mountford's fourth-grade students, who are paired with a group of first-grade students. During their peer sessions, the older students read and respond to the writing samples of the younger students; then the younger readers listen to the writing samples of their older peer partners. Reviewing the success of this cooperative learning technique, Mountford arrives at the following conclusions about her student writers and their younger partners:

> One girl, Ivy, who has dyslexic tendencies and struggles with her reading and writing, was a wonderful teacher and really helped her first-grade partner. Another boy, Roy, would have five or six first-grade boys all in a group, working with all of them beautifully. It is important [that] students

> work with older students and be taught. . . . My students also loved reading their published stories to the kindergarten students who, in turn, loved hearing them.

Mountford's technique builds self-esteem in her budding student writers since they feel as though they have knowledge to share with others. Equally as important, Mountford's students write their papers for a real-life audience, not a theoretical one. In Writing without Teachers, Elbow mentions that one of the dynamics of the "teacherless writing groups" is that writers read aloud to a real audience (83).

IV

In transcending the boundaries in her classroom, Nancy Romero, a 1993 Fellow of NWP of Acadiana and an English teacher at Acadiana High School in Lafayette, LA, contends that teachers must build a non-threatening community at the beginning of the year, semester, or quarter. Practitioners should encourage students to respond freely and honestly to each other's writing. In keeping with this point, Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff contend that student writers must offer responses that are honest (45). After students establish trust and honesty, Romero argues that student writers can be open to criticism. Romero explains that because collaboration helps students who struggle to express their ideas on paper, teachers should develop assignments that require group work.

One strategy which has been effective for Romero in promoting community among writers is a fable/fairy tale assignment. Students select writing teams to compose an original fable or fairy tale. Then, each student writer composes a draft. After doing so, writers meet in their groups to read each draft and discuss strengths and weaknesses of each paper. Choosing the best features of each individual draft, students collectively write and revise one group draft, which is then submitted for evaluation (Romero). Romero's strategy is not a typical reader-response approach, particularly since she involves a number of students in compiling one solid collaborative draft.

Like Romero, in recognizing the importance of community in his classroom, Bill Chiquelin, a 1993 Fellow of the NWP of Acadiana and an English/Language Arts teacher at Broussard Middle School in Broussard, LA, states, "We are social animals, yet we are taught in isolation. . .. We learn language by modeling--which we get from collaborative learning." However, he contends that many teachers are reluctant to use collaborative learning strategies because they graduated from universities where instruction in composition theory and pedagogy was absent from the curriculum. Chiquelin states candidly that he is a co-learner with his students.

Furthermore, Chiquelin states that encouraging students to offer constructive criticism on teachers' writing drafts

validates that practitioners are "co-learners" in the writing class. Knowing that this strategy empowers student writers and make them active agents in their leaning process, Chiquelin often allows his students to critique his work. Chiquelin transcends the typical teacher-student boundary that traditionally has empowered teachers and "de-powered" students, making students passive agents. Contrary to this method, Chiquelin challenges students to become active agents of knowledge, active learners, active readers, and active responders through collaboration. After all, writing teachers should "create a [social] context which endows students with a sense of purpose and responsibility associated with producing texts to communicate with and influence others" (Beach 118).

V

In keeping with the National Writing Project philosophy of "teachers teaching teachers," these four Teacher Consultants of the Louisiana NWP use this philosophy in their classrooms, as student writers learn from and teach each other through a collaborative means of trial and error. In essence, their innovative teaching styles promote an important aspect of the philosophy of the NWP: Teachers are co-writers and co-learners in collaboration with their students in and out of the academy.

In classifying the theories and pedagogies employed by the four TC's in this article, I conclude that these

collaborative learning strategies are aligned with the theoretical school of the New Rhetoric because all of these strategies focus on the relationship among the writer, reader, and text. As result, a great deal of emphasis is placed upon the social construction of the writing samples, i.e., the writer's interaction with both the reader and the text, as in the case with Ward and Chiquelin, who emphasize the teacher's role as co-learner or co-writer along with students. Likewise, Romero and Mountford use strategies where students work together in a cooperative atmosphere to generate texts. In this case, the teacher's role is primarily that of facilitator or task setter. Whether through partnership writing, team writing, or other forms of collaborative learning, student writers engage in a discourse whereby they create knowledge through transactional rhetoric. In other words, as Berlin states, "All truths arise out of dialectic, out of the interaction of individuals within discourse communities" (17).

In the end, as Patricia Ward postulates, practitioners are as "smoldering coals," used to ignite the fire of knowledge in student learners, who carry with them these "coals" or learning tools throughout their journey in the academy as well as outside the academy. In order to be like "smoldering coals," we as practitioners must continue to meet the diverse social and intellectual needs of our global classrooms where students are held accountable for

constructing their own knowledge and practitioners serve as task setters, facilitators, co-learners, and, finally, as evaluators. All in, I urge all practitioners to join me in developing new methods of cooperative learning that go beyond the boundaries of our comfort zones.

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