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ABSTRACT

This paper paints the overall picture and contextualizes a project on K-16 articulation in southeastern Massachusetts. The paper first describes the project and then addresses three broad areas: the state climate in higher education in Massachusetts; the regional context of such a project within the southeastern area of the state; and the relevance to the project of a broad climate of change at Bridgewater State College, the lead institution in the initiative. It explains that the project was the brainchild of Bridgewater's then provost who wrote a grant to the State Board of Higher Education to increase formalized communication between K-12, the community colleges, and the 4-year institution. The paper points out that working in the articulation project was a way to educate the Bridgewater English department about teachers in other segments, about student needs, and about composition teaching in general. (NKA)

Building Bridges: A K-16 Articulation Initiative

by Iain Crawford
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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (90th, Milwaukee, WI, November 16-21, 2000).

What, you may ask, is someone from Southern Indiana doing leading off a panel discussion on K-16 articulation in southeastern Massachusetts? And what, indeed, is he doing with an accent that owes much more to southern England than to the lower Ohio valley? The short answer is that, before moving to my current position at USI, I chaired the English department at Bridgewater State College and was thus engaged in developing the articulation initiative our panel today is going to describe.

My role here today is to paint the overall picture and to contextualize a project that my colleagues will then discuss in greater detail. Specifically, I'd like to describe the project itself and then address three broad areas: the state climate in higher education in Massachusetts; the regional context of such a project within the southeastern area of the state; and the relevance to the project of a broad climate of change at Bridgewater State, the lead institution in the initiative.

How did this project begin? The most important thing to note here is that it was top down rather than grassroots in its origins. That is, it was in essence the brainchild of Bridgewater's then provost, who wrote a grant to the state Board of Higher Education. A former dean of education, she has long had an interest in collaboration across the segments and she recognized that the lack of formalized communication between K-12, the community

colleges, and the four-year institution was a serious weakness. By creating a forum in which faculty from the various segments could come together around common concerns, she saw a way for us all to escape the vicious cycle of attributing our students' deficiencies to those who had taught them earlier and an opportunity instead to forge more constructive connections with one another. In its conception and goals, the project was thus laudably well-intentioned. That it came about as the result of a wholly administrative initiative did, however, mean there was some danger of its not taking root widely and deeply at the faculty level. The difficulty, I believe, lay in the conflict between opposing values: on the one hand, administrative direction meant that something **did** happen and reasonably quickly; on the other, a grassroots impulse might have generated deeper engagement but could have taken much longer to organize. And time was an issue, as I will mention later.

Structurally, the initiative was designed to take place over a single academic year and to include discipline-based teams from Bridgewater State, three regional community colleges which provide BSC with many transfer students, and a selection of high schools that feed into both Bridgewater and the community colleges. The disciplines involved were English, math, and science, although our focus here is only with English and

the groups focused upon writing, and the teams totaled approximately 25 faculty from the three segments. Each team was in turn sub-divided into groups working on curriculum and assessment, respectively. Meetings were held at Bridgewater, CourseInfo was used to develop electronic conversation between meetings and create an ongoing record of discussion, and the whole project concluded with a conference at the end of the year. Following the conference, the three team leaders wrote reports that were folded into a document the provost submitted to the Board of Higher Education.

If this was the structure of the project, how was that structure affected by the various contexts in which it actually existed? Here, as we learned, concept and reality developed a fascinating set of relationships. Let me begin by describing the larger climate for public education in the state.

Massachusetts, as I learned when I moved there in 1995, is particularly rich in the confrontational nature of its politics—the Sopranos look quite functional in comparison! Almost nowhere is this more visible than in education, and a state which is almost unmatched in the quality of its private institutions of higher education is remarkably unsupportive of its public educational systems. Coming to Massachusetts from Georgia, where the leadership of former Governor Zell Miller has transformed education from pre-K through the college level, I found the lack of support and

profoundly adversarial climate something of a shock. I learned, however, that this was the way things were done—or, all too often, not done—in the Commonwealth. Throughout the 90's, hostility between Republican governors and the state education system played itself out in various ways: through interventionist moves by the gubernatorial proxy, the Board of Higher Education, for example, or through an invariably bitter and inordinately lengthy process of negotiating faculty contracts with the various unions. (In the state colleges, for example, there has still been no agreement on a contract to replace that which expired on June 30, 1998!)

In such a climate, trends that have become standard throughout the country took on a much darker coloring. For example, the initiative towards high-stakes testing in K-12 (known in Massachusetts as the MCAS), the redirection of less qualified students into two-year institutions ostensibly for developmental purposes, the implementation of a high-stakes testing regime for candidates in teacher preparation, and the introduction of direct testing for placement into freshmen writing courses—all of these developments were mandated without real discussion with teachers and college faculty and were accompanied by highly confrontational public discourse in which educators were invariably blamed for their students' "failings." Not surprisingly, then, there has been very little trust in the relationship between

educators and the political agencies that administer them. Given this context, by the way, it struck many of us at the time that there was much irony in the fact that our project should have been funded by the BHE, a body that so often seemed singularly indifferent to teachers' concerns.

Within the state, our focus was distinctly regional, and this is the second of the contexts I'd like to outline. We worked within the distinct geographical frame of southeastern Massachusetts, a region that, for all its social variety, does have a common sense of its identity as the state's South Shore. For our project, the strength of this regional character of the initiative lay primarily in the extent to which it brought together three educational constituencies that had previously had very little interaction. Bridgewater State, with an enrollment of some 8500 students, was founded in 1840 as the first normal school in the country. Evolving into a comprehensive teaching university, it has retained its major role in teacher preparation. It has also become a natural next step for many of the students who begin their higher education at the second group in the project, three regional community colleges--Massasoit, Bristol, and Cape Cod. Indeed, one of the trends of recent years has been the active development of joint admissions programs for students intending to eventually transfer. Similarly, given BSC's role in teacher education and the fact that so many of its future teachers are both

drawn from and return to the K-12 schools in the area, it only made sense to develop a stronger relationship between the four-year college faculty and the high school teachers, the third of the member groups.

One weakness in our regional grounding arose from the haste with which the teams were put together. Massachusetts was the last state in the union to adopt a budget in fiscal 1999-2000 and, as a result, our project began not in September, as we had planned, but only in the following February. Given the compressed time then available to us, we were forced to recruit high school teachers quickly and where we could—there was no opportunity to cover the region systematically and include a more representative selection of participants.

My third and final context for this project is that provided by Bridgewater State College itself. During the past five years, a great deal of change has occurred, both in the college as a whole and within the English department, and this change was an important factor underlying the articulation initiative.

On the macro level, a fundamental demographic shift has been occurring as the wave of faculty hired in the late 60's and early 70's began moving into retirement. The School of Arts and Sciences, for instance, has seen some 40% of its faculty retire in the past five years. Unlike many

institutions, Bridgewater has replaced these senior professors with new *tenure-track* hires. As a result, there has been an enormous change in the composition of the faculty and new interests in a variety of issues: general education reform, outcomes assessment, undergraduate research, for instance, have all become newly important in the life of the college. Accordingly, it has been a good time to address fundamental pedagogical issues, and, inevitably, writing is an issue that everyone agrees needs improving.

On the micro level, these changes were also impacting the English department. When I arrived as its externally hired chair in 1995, the department was an aging one. Almost all of its faculty had been trained before 1970 and it was heavy in what I came to call pre-post-structuralist knowledge of literary studies and burdened by wary unfamiliarity with more recent developments in critical theory. It also included not a single assistant professor and nobody trained in rhetoric and composition, other than a Writing Center director who was on a terminal contract for having failed to complete his dissertation. Over the five years that followed, however, we hired several new faculty in rhet and comp, and we deliberately recruited literature teachers with training in composition and a commitment to its teaching. At the time of the initiative, we were also engaged in our first

substantial program review of the English curriculum. Even with these significant changes, five years is a short time and, when we began the articulation project, much remained to be done to modernize the department and its teaching. One of the less overt benefits of the initiative was the way in which it brought four-year college faculty into connection with both the high school teachers and with some exceptional community college faculty. As many of you will know, Bristol Community College is the institution at which Howard Tinberg works—a colleague who needs no introduction at this conference but whose name would, I feel confident in saying, would have meant nothing to 90% of the Bridgewater faculty in 1995. Working in the articulation project, then, was a way to educate the Bridgewater English department: about teachers in other segments, about student needs, and about composition teaching in general. It is not, then, I suspect, wholly a coincidence that this year the department has decided to hire its first director of composition. Finally, and most generally, this climate of change within the department itself and the college at large meant that the initiative has had a good opportunity to continue, even though both the provost who launched it and the chair of the department have moved on to new universities and other administrative positions.

But with this to administrative moves, I am, I believe, where I came in, and so having offered you a brief account of the background, contexts, and structure of our articulation initiative, I will now hand you over to my colleagues to discuss the specifics of the project, what we learned, and what lies ahead.

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