Roundtable 1: Introduction

English Classrooms as Social Spaces: Using Collaboration to Foster Student-Centered Learning

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Perhaps one of the most persistent challenges we face as English instructors is finding ways to engage students from a variety of discipline-specific backgrounds not only with writing assignments but also with each other in the classroom. Because many of the classes we teach are general education requirements or general electives, open to students of all majors, the student make-up of the classroom can vary greatly. Sometimes this situation can have the unfortunate consequence of segmented classrooms where alienated students do not bother to learn even the names of their peers. No matter who enrolls in our classrooms, though, the central goals for all English classes—composition, professional and technical communication, creative wring, introduction to literature—remain similar: we want to foster critical and creative thinking and the skillful use of language and genre knowledge. We want students to build an understanding of themselves as writers who compose as part of a chain of discourse for an audience. Finally, we want students to learn that writing and knowledge can never be made productively in isolation, a belief perpetuated by the myth of the solitary author-genius.

Structuring classrooms with various forms of collaboration cannot only help instructors meet the above goals, but can also have the added benefit of fostering a sense of ludic community within the classroom space, a quality of playfulness and concrete feedback that many

thinkers, including creativity researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, distinguish as the best

possible condition for learning and growing as individuals.

In order to achieve a community where students from various backgrounds learn to provide

such feedback to each other, we as writing instructors should reconsider the usefulness of many

established classroom activities, as well as developing digital tools that may strengthen

communal bonds even more. For example, Mary Assad discusses how peer review workshops in

her "Writing for the Health Professions" class allow her students to better understand their

various audiences. She believes that her students' various medical discipline specific

backgrounds, which range from biomedical sciences to nutrition, actually helps them perform the

role of non-specialist reader in the peer critique more effectively, as they can draw upon some

common knowledge in the larger medical field to help one another in their writing.

In other classes, working with a variety of majors could be equally useful when trying to

challenge assumed bodies of knowledge. Jason Carney discusses his pedagogical framework of

"literary amateurism" for teaching "Introduction to Literature for Non-English Majors." Rather

than using assumed "expert" answers to questions of literary interpretation, which may alienate

students not versed in that "expert" knowledge, "literary amateurism" celebrates the

collaborative knowledge creation of the non-expert students, as they interpret, both individually

and together, a sequence of anonymized passages. Students give their own collaboratively-

created meaning to texts, giving them a way to understand and appreciate the literature more.

These collaborative activities, peer review and in-class brainstorming and sharing, play

important roles in not only helping students learn key lessons from their respective English class,

but also in helping to create and reinforce a sense of community in these classrooms. An

increasingly common way to establish community and conduct collaboration is through digital means. The last three Roundtable authors discuss usages for digital technology for collaboration. Kevin Risner overviews three common digital platforms used in composition classrooms: academic tools for file sharing including Blackboard, non-academic blogs for extended discussion/collaboration between instructor and students, and finally, social network sites, including Facebook and Twitter. Risner's interviews with composition instructors who have successfully integrated one or more of these technologies highlight an important issue: students' familiarity and proficiency with these technologies make them seem like ideal tools for encouraging collaboration and writing.

For English instructors who decide to bring these technologies into their classrooms, it is most effective to include the students in the decisions for outlining the best practices for collaborating online. This collaborative gesture should strengthen the notion of communication and knowledge-making as inherently social processes. I discuss how my inclusion of a blog in a developmental composition classroom helped to show writing's social nature and reinforce the effectiveness of writing through the process method. I speculate on how social network sites may further heighten students' awareness of the sociality of writing, using Bakhtin's notion of communication chains that make clear the connectedness of communication.

Finally, Mike Wright examines how he modified what was originally going to be a "paper-only" poetry workshop to fit the computer classroom his class worked in. The use of computers, in fact, strengthened the understanding the students had of collaborative nature of writing as they physically moved between computers, adding to the writing started by their peers. This activity

helped to assuage some students' fears of sharing their writing, as everyone composed together, so all knew that no one's writing was perfect.

A desire to bring students together in a classroom through various collaborative activities has many benefits. Collaboration engages writers in classroom learning that they may not have a previous interest in, given their backgrounds. When instructors use digital technology, collaboration not only becomes easy, but it gives students an even more familiar space to work within, and shows how all communication is social and never achieved alone.