Crossing over: Transitioning between high school and college writing instruction

Abstract

Transitioning between high school and college level writing instruction can be difficult for students depending on their level of preparation. Organizations such as Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC, 2008) and Southern Regional Education Board (SREB, 2007) as well as researchers such as David Conley (2007) and The James R. Squire Office of Policy Research (2008) have described college readiness standards for college-bound students. Within these college readiness standards, writing instruction is considered an important element. In this research, I address these questions: What types of writing activities and assignments do high school students need to engage in order to prepare for college? What types of writing activities and assignments do freshmen composition instructors use in their classrooms? Finally, what can be done to create a connection between high school English/writing instruction and college level writing instruction?

Crossing over: Transitioning between high school and college writing instruction

My first contact with high school student writing instruction was in the fall of 2001 at the Alternative High School Center (AHSC) within the Corpus Christi Independent School District (CCISD).[1] The "problems" with writing instruction and student engagement was not instantly visible to me at that time. I did not know what problems students had with writing, nor was I aware of some of the issues that teachers were experiencing with getting their students to read or write better. I did notice that the constant theme, or attitude, among most of the teachers at AHSC was that these students were not going to college anyway so why focus so much time and effort on preparing to write analytically or critically. I am not claiming that the teachers at AHSC (now Solomon Coles High School & Education Center) were not trying hard enough to help the students write more analytically or critically, nor am I trying to claim that students were incapable of such tasks. However, I am claiming that while there is a demand in gauging, evaluating, and assessing writing levels in students, there is an increasing interest in re-assessing and re-evaluating the instruction of writing at the high school in order to prepare students for college expectations.

The current interest in preparing high school students for college has led to a wide range of views and literature as well as programs, such as Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi's (TAMU-CC) High School Summer Bridge (HSSB) for local and surrounding public high school juniors and seniors and Gear-up for seventh and eight graders.[2] These programs address "college readiness standards" that students need to meet before enrolling at a university. While the

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[1] For more information on AHSC/Solomon Coles High School & Education Center, please visit the Corpus Christi Independent School District (http://coles.ccisd.us/home.aspx).
[2] For more information on these two programs: High School Summer Bridge Program & Gear-up (http://critical.tamucc.edu/studentwiki/GildaRamirez/HighSchoolSummerBridgeProgram2008 & http://star.tamucc.edu/).

literature and programs provide some insight into the differences between high school and college level expectations, there has not been much discussion into the areas of writing instruction. For the purposes of this research, I will provide some insight into the various activities and assignments that current writing instructors use in their freshmen composition classrooms as well as their reasons for using them the way they do. I have interviewed a composition instructor at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. Through this interview and the literature, I will examine some of the factors that are considered when designing activities and assignments to help students transitioning between high school and college levels of writing. The main question that I am trying to answer is how does writing instruction differ from high school to college and what are teachers and college instructors doing to assist students in this transition?

<div align="center">Transitioning challenges</div>

The transition from high school to college can be jolting to many students. Depending on the student, this "jolting effect" can be interpreted in many different ways. College freshmen might feel as if they are entering an unknown world where classes and assignments are unfamiliar and confusing. Two semesters of English composition is a requirement by many colleges and universities. Many students soon realize that college English is not like high school English. Freshman English composition courses usually set higher expectations writing, reading, and researching than were required or expected at the high school level. When the trend in composition shifted from personal expression of the 1960s and 1970s to more of a social and political focus in the 1980s and 1990s, many composition instructors kept the "process pedagogy" part of writing instruction (i.e. brainstorming, outlining, drafting, peer reviewing, peer editing) and added an argumentative and a social-rhetorical focus to their classroom discussions, activities, and assignments (Peter Elbow, 1980; James Berlin, 1984, 1987; Louise

Wetherbee Phelps, 1988; Linda Brodkey, 1996). Beyond the social-political-economic argumentative and rhetoric trends in current composition studies, instructors of freshmen composition usually focus on evaluating student writing, so activities and assignments are largely centered on having the students produce pieces of writing such as personal narratives, research essays, source reviews, annotated bibliographies, etc.

Mike Rose (1985) claims that with a rich cultural-political-social focus in an English composition classroom, some students do not have the necessary background in comprehending how to "write, or communicate, like an academic" (Rose, pp. 350-51). The fusion of the subjective and objective in understanding, expressing, indentifying, researching, arguing, reading, and writing as not yet occurred for many high school students and college freshmen. Rose argues that while many high schools fall short of preparing students for college, he also suggests that universities take a hard look at their curriculums (p. 551 & p. 566). Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, along with many other universities and two-year colleges around the country, have started to follow Rose's suggestions by initiating programs such as the *High School Summer Bridge* for juniors and seniors and *Gear-up* for seventh and eighth graders in the local and surrounding public school districts.

With these types of bridging programs, how can teachers help students connect and prepare for college? What types of writing activities and assignments should teachers have their students do? Should high school teachers and college instructors follow, or expect, David Bartholomae's (1985) "clay model" description of student writing (Bartholomae, p. 147)? Are students simply trying on the "academic" suit when they write to see what it feels and looks like? Or should teachers take another perspective that involves approaching instruction from a multiple-literacies standpoint? Brian Street (1984) cites Paulo Freire when he argues,

"Acquiring literacy, he [Freire] believed, is an active process of consciousness and not just the learning of a fixed content," but where learning, reading, and writing is "geared to people's own interests and not simply to those of profit-making by commercial interests" (Street, p. 186). According to Street, and following what Vygotsky's (1978) learning theories also claim, that students should be allowed communicate, read and write, in what they find interesting. James Paul Gee (1989) argues that many students find it difficult to balance the Discourse/discourse distinction within their writing.

According to Gee, the (capital "D") Discourse of the academic institution should not overshadow the (lowercase "d") discourses that students bring with them to the classroom. Gee recommends that "teaching and learning" should be "carefully ordered and integrated with acquisition" of discourses in order to have positive effects on one another (Gee, p. 19-20). Gee's perspective on acquiring and learning primary and secondary discourses lies outside of how traditional academic Discourse defines literacy in the classroom because it suggests that students and teachers "critique" their primary and secondary discourse (p. 24-25). For Gee, the practice of literacies in the classroom involves more than merely joining a new discourse community, but also further developing and building on the discourse communities that students bring with them into the classroom. What types of activities and assignments should high school students do in order to prepare for joining a new discourse community such as that of the academic institution? What are the current standards for preparing students for college?

<div align="center">College readiness standards for writing</div>

What is college readiness? Various educational programs and agencies have come to define and describe college readiness differently. In a report for the Educational Policy Improvement Center, David Conley (2007) describes college readiness:

College readiness is a multi-faceted concept comprising numerous variables that include

factors both internal and external to the school environment. In order to provide a

functional representation of the key facets of college readiness, the model presented

below organizes the key areas necessary for college readiness into four concentric levels.

These four areas of college readiness knowledge and skills emerge from a review of the

literature and are those that can be most directly influences by schools. (Conley, 2007, p.

12)

Below is Conley's model (2007) that describes his four key dimensions of college readiness:
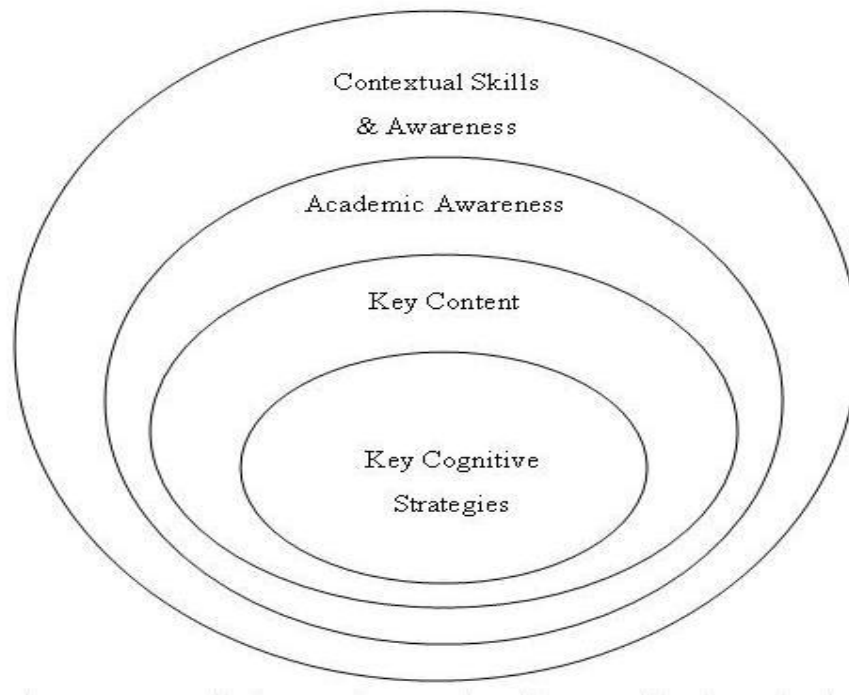
Figure 1. Model retrieved from David Conley's report to EPIC (2007).

While Conley's model is broad, how do these key factors effect writing instruction? What impact

do these four factors have on high school English classrooms?

According to Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC) on English/Language Arts

Standards for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2008), "the complex role of

language in education makes it clear that the language arts cannot be left entirely to the English

class" (EPIC, Texas College Readiness Standards, 2008, p. 9). EPIC lists seven specific areas in

which English teachers can help students in the areas of writing and reading (EPIC, 2008, p. 9).[3]

One of these areas involves teaching students various genres of writing. The reason why I choose

to focus on the English/Language Arts is that this subject area is usually connected to the various

types of writing activities and assignments that teachers have their students do in their

classrooms. EPIC lists five specific goals & objectives for writing in the English/Language Arts

Standards.[4] Most of these standards are presented in the form of goals and objectives for college

readiness deal with technical features of writing, such as grammar, sentence structure, and

paragraph formation, as well as indentifying audience, locating and analyzing primary and

secondary sources for research purposes, organization, stylistics, drafting, revising, editing, and

Standard English (p. 11). How these standards, goals, and objectives transform into writing

activities and assignments is defined and described in many ways. Below are three possible

categories in which to view college readiness standards for writing instruction:

College Readiness Standards for Writing

David T. Conley's "Toward a more comprehensive conception of college readiness," prepared for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2007), an EPIC report	EPIC's English/Language Arts Standards and adopted by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (January 24, 2008) for writing	Southern Regional Education Board views on writing (SREB, 2007)
Writing + more expectations:	Writing + more expectations:	Writing + more expectations:

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[3] For more information on Texas stance on college readiness standards, please see the website (http://www.epiconline.org/texas_college_readiness_standards/standards).
[4] This information can be found on page 11 in the EPIC Report for Texas College Readiness Standards for the English/Language Arts Standards, 2008 (http://www.epiconline.org).

"Reading and writing skills and strategies sufficient to process the full range of textual materials commonly encountered in entry-level college courses, and to respond successfully to the written assignments commonly required in such courses" "Ability to accept critical feedback including critiques of written work submitted or an argument presented in class" "Write a 3- to 5-page research paper that is structured around a cogent, coherent line reasoning, incorporate references from several credible and appropriate citations; is relatively free from spelling, grammatical, and usage errors; and is clear and easily understood by the reader" "Conduct research on a topic and be able to identify successfully a series of source materials that are important and appropriate to explain the question being research; organize and summarize the results from the search, and synthesize the findings in a coherent fashion relevant to the larger questions being investigated" "Utilize key technological tools including appropriate computer software to	"Compose a variety of texts that demonstrate clear focus, the logical development of ideas in well-organized paragraphs, and the use of appropriate language that advances the author's purpose" "Determine effective approaches, forms, and rhetorical techniques that demonstrate understanding of the writer's purpose and audience" "Generate ideas and gather information relevant to the topic and purpose, keeping careful records of outside sources" "Evaluate relevance, quality, sufficiency, and depth of preliminary ideas and information, organize material generated, and formulate thesis" "Recognize the importance of revision as the key to effective writing. Each draft should refine key ideas and organize them more logically and fluidly, use language more precisely and effectively, and draw the reader to the author's purpose" "Edit writing for proper voice, tense, and syntax, assuring that it conforms to Standard English, when appropriate" (EPIC, 2008, p. 11)	"Reading: Students read the equivalent of eight to 10 books a year – including novels, short stories, plays, technical manuals, essays, journal articles and other real-world texts – and analyze the content through written reports, oral presentations, peer discussions and performance of tasks of tasks described in the text." "Writing: Students write every day in various formats for multiple audiences. Each week, students prepare a paper of at least three pages for a grade. Teachers use rubrics to grade writing and to provide guidance for students to revise frequently. Students should write to demonstrate learning (e.g. essays, constructed response questions), and for audiences and purposes beyond the classroom (e.g. letters, business proposals, editorials)" (SREB, p. 10) "Research: Students conduct research for a variety of papers, including a formal research paper. Students should define their own questions, locate and evaluate information, summarize and paraphrase information, combine information in cogent writing, and document sources." "Speaking and Listening: Students participate in learning conservations

complete academic tasks such as conducting research, analyzing data sets, writing papers, preparing presentations, and recovering data" "Present an accurate self-assessment of readiness for college by analyzing and citing evidence from classroom work and assignments, grades, courses taken, national and state exams taken, and a personal assessment of maturity and self-discipline" (Conley, 2007, pp.18-19)		(cooperative learning), as well as frequent presentations. They listen for various purposes, including note-taking and analyzing presentations by classmates and others." "Technology: Students frequently use technology to locate and present information. They conduct Internet searches, and use common presentation tools such as PowerPoint and word processing software." (SREB, p. 10)

Table 1. Represents various standards and expectations for college level writing and thinking.

While these standards and expectations are at the college level, they are assumed to be introduced and taught in public schools. This assumption, or expectation, of colleges that public schools implement or guide their curriculums based on some of the writing standards above places pressure on English teachers. Peter Worley (2008) claims that writing instruction should not be left up to the English departments in public schools. Worley argues that "[a] ll educators need to teach proper ways to communicate through various media, and it all starts in writing of one form or another" (Worley, p. 19). Many educators might claim that they are already doing this in their classes, but Worley, as well as EPIC, are suggesting something else than Writing-Across-the-Disciplines (WAC) and Writing-in-the-Disciplines (WIC) programs. Part of the shift to writing intensive attitudes is due to the English department's failure to make writing a discipline within itself. Beyond the process approach to writing instruction and the tendencies of many teachers to focus on the technical and grammatical features of student writing, there is a

social aspect to writing that serves and determines the purpose why a writer writes. Many composition practitioners and theorists have named this external purpose the writer's audience. This approach to writing instruction locks it down in almost strictly textual forms and modes of communication, keeping writing instruction a cognitive activity.

An alternative approach to writing instruction includes engaging the students in activities and assignments that are "*authentic*." According to a forum of educators and policymakers held by the Southern Regional Education Board (2007), "frequent assignments and authentic, real-world assignments with depth and complexity to develop students' critical thinking and analytical skills" (www.sreb.org, 2007, p. 9). Discussion between presenters and participants at this forum suggests a shift away from pure classroom instruction when it comes to writing and research. Their definition of college readiness includes intensive reading, frequent writing assignments, conducting research, presentational skills, and the use of technology and multimedia (p. 10). When discussing transitioning high school students to college, many presenters and participants at the 2007 SREB forum stressed the importance of career guidance, integration of technology in activities and assignments, and "problem- and project-based learning that connect[s] students to authentic, real-world problems" (p. 13). The James R. Squire Office of Policy Research (2008) states these areas when discussing authentic writing:

- The importance of audience awareness and diverse writing styles (genres)

- The utilization and integration of technology when writing

- The interaction between classroom and "real-world experiences" (James R. Squire Office of Policy Research, 2008, p. 18)

Other factors that the Squire research include the emphasis on collaborative writing tasks and activities and using technology (pp. 18-19). However, incorporating collaborative writing

activities and assignments using technology such as computers in the English high school classroom depends on individual school curriculums and access to hardware and software.

Elizabeth Dillon-Marable & Thomas Valentine (2006) examine the complex integration of incorporating technology into the classroom for adult learners. Dillon-Marable & Valentine conclude:

> Appropriate suggests that the software and computer programs purchased be suited to the background and experience of the learner. This would involve a clear assessment of learner needs and abilities by knowledgeable experts. It would also involve expertise for the purchase of assistive technologies appropriate for students with both physical and learning disabilities. (Dillon-Marable & Valentine, p. 111)

By having students use technology to write and research, they not only learn how to write within various genres but also how to write for a larger audience and in diverse formats, which resembles writing in the real world. However, as Dillon-Marable & Valentine point that schools would also factor in the students with disabilities or special needs.

Teacher perspectives on reading and writing instruction in South Texas

In order to gain a better understanding of what types of writing instruction is done at the college level, I decided to focus on interviewing a composition instructor from Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. Since I am currently teaching freshmen composition at TAMU-CC, seeking out and contacting a possible interviewee was convenient for me. The main reasons that I conducted this interview was to see how, if any, connections were being made to the college readiness standards in the form of writing instruction and what types of writing and researching activities and assignments were being done at the college level.

Method

For the purposes of this research, I decided to focus on writing and reading instruction in Corpus Christi, Texas. My interviewee is a composition instructor of Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. I asked my interviewee two sets of questions (please Appendices A & B for the questions I asked). I conducted the interview through the email.

Interview: Freshmen composition instructor

"Shelia I." has been teaching freshmen composition at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi for six years.[5] She teaches English Composition 1301 and 1302. Sarah has been working with adult learners for the last ten years. For the last few years, she has been teaching "stand alone" composition classes. Stand-alone composition classes are not included within a triad, tetrad, or pentad learning communities. This means that Shelia I. does not have to theme her composition courses around a large lecture (i.e. political science, history, psychology, etc.) or coordinate her classes with a seminar leader.

One of the first questions that I asked Shelia I. was how does she characterize adult learners (college freshmen and above)? Shelia I.'s response was, "Because of the diversity of learners in first-year programs, it is not possible to characterize them--some out of high school, some transfers from other schools, some who are upper-level, some non-traditional who are professionals returning to pursue a degree, some international students." Therefore, the issue of "transition" is not only from high school to college but also could be from native language to non-native language or profession to college classroom. One of the best things that Shelia I. enjoys about working with adult learners is that parents are not directly involved in the education process. To the question, what are the challenges of working with adult learners, Shelia I. responded, "The major challenge is to accommodate all learning levels, learning styles, and to

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[5] I am using the pseudonym "Shelia I." to protect the identity of the instructor.

give students the research and technological skills to approach writing in all disciplines with

confidence." While this question applies to education theories and practices in general, it can

also be applied to writing instruction, especially if the students enter the class having written in

various formats, styles, and for various audiences.

The second set of questions that I asked Shelia I. consisted of what types of writing

activities and assignments that she used in her composition classrooms. My first question to

Shelia I. was about her teaching philosophy or theory for adult learners. Shelia I.'s response:

> *As a former TV news reporter and producer, I have a natural curiosity. Teaching research and writing to freestanding classes, students have the freedom to choose writing topics. This is where I try to get them involved--draw out their interests so that they approach research and writing as an exploratory journey rather than a dreaded task. We spend a week or more brainstorming topics so that by the time they write a topic proposal, their choices have been narrowed to something that they will enjoy writing about.*

Shelia I.'s approach to her composition courses is largely student-based, where information

stems from their own personal interests and what affects them in their own lives. Shelia I. uses a

process pedagogy approach to teaching writing (i.e. brainstorming, etc.) to her students.

The second question I asked Shelia I. was to explain the reasoning behind your research

and writing assignments (i.e. portfolios). How does it benefit the students? Shelia I.'s detailed

response is below:

Shelia I.'s 1301: Composition 1:

> *1301: Composition 1: I am experimenting with this introductory course that introduces students to college level writing. I have approached it in two ways:*
>
> - *Portfolio 1—Informative paper, MLA documentation, 5 research sources required*
> - *Portfolio 2—Argument paper, MLA documentation, 5 research sources required*
> - *Portfolio 3—Visual Text--PowerPoint presentation*

These assignments give students the preparation necessary to approach the more in-depth information literacy, MLA documentation, and research writing required in 1302. This semester I am experimenting with Portfolio 1 by substituting a personal experience paper in order to vary the genres. Some students have demonstrated creative writing talent. I am not sure that this will contribute to their overall performance in research writing. The sequence is Personal Experience, Informative, and Visual Text. This omits the Argument paper, which is not an objective for 1301.

In Shelia I.'s portfolio sequence, she focuses on learning research skills and documentation styles, which adheres to the goals and objectives of the First-Year Writing Program at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.[6] Beyond the three different genres that Sarah does in her portfolio sequence, she mentions experimenting with a "personal experience" essay. Other composition instructors in the TAMU-CC's FYWP incorporate a personal essay (i.e. a "citizen autobiography" and/or a "literacy autobiography" where the student focuses on him/herself and their family background) as their portfolio writing assignment. I am not sure if the personal experience essay that Shelia I. mentions here equates with any of the personal essays that the other composition instructors are doing as a part of their portfolio sequences.

Shelia I.'s 1302: Composition 2:

- *Portfolio 1—Informative paper, MLA documentation, minimum 10 research sources required, 10 source evaluations (8 written--1-page minimum; 2 as class presentations using Word Reviewing). Paper presents multiple perspectives--writer does not take a position on the issue but presents the audience with facts supported by research.*
- *Portfolio 2—Argument paper, MLA documentation, minimum 10 research sources required, 10 source evaluations (8 written--1-page minimum; 2 as class presentations using Word Reviewing). Paper states strong thesis in which writer takes a position and supports it with research, addresses opposing POV, and refutes with evidence.*
- *Portfolio 3—Visual Text--PowerPoint--visual presentation of topic, expanded reflective overview, works cited of copyrighted material*

This semester, after receiving approval from my supervisor, I am experimenting with giving students the option of using different topics for each portfolio. Previously, the department policy was to have students choose one semester topic for all three. I will

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[6] First-Year Writing Program at TAMU-CC (http://firstyear.tamucc.edu/uploads/English1301/1301objectives.htm).

have to look at the outcomes at the end of the semester before deciding to stay with the changes.

Shelia I. mentions the three-portfolio sequence with focus on researching and writing an argument. Shelia I. does more of a detailed and expanded version of what she does in composition 1301 with more of an expanded emphasis on multiple-perspectives and arguments. Shelia I. is following the TAMU-CC's goals, objectives, and 1302 description for the second semester of English composition.

The third question I asked Shelia I. was how do you feel you are contributing to your students' success at becoming literate? At the personal level? At the academic level? Shelia I. responded:

- *Literacy: Students receive a good foundation in information literacy, critical thinking, documentation skills, and practice them in both courses.*
- *Personal: These are always very high percentages on my student evaluations--I have a good rapport with students. Again, this goes to my reporter's interest in people and issues.*
- *Academic: So far, students in my 1302 classes who took 1301 with me are better prepared for the requirements in 1302 than some of the other students as evidenced by their performance. I believe that the assignment sequences and skills learned in 1301 and 1302 give students a reliable process that can prepare them to approach writing tasks with confidence, not only in English, but in other disciplines.*

Shelia I.'s responses each category (i.e. literacy, personal, & academic) tend to focus on teaching students that writing and researching is a process, which entails learning how to use citations, conduct academic research, and write in various genres.

<div align="center">Interview analysis</div>

While Shelia I. largely focuses on teaching her students certain documentation styles (i.e. MLA), how to write various genres, research and write an argument with multiple perspectives, and that writing is a process, she did not mention using technology other than MS Word Reviewing and MS PowerPoint. According to the literature, pre-college students should be

taught how to write, or to perceive writing tasks, using technology such as computers and that they should be taught how to research and write together in collaborative groups is not necessarily the case in Shelia I.'s 1301 and 1302 English composition courses. Perhaps providing high school students (i.e. pre-college bound) to the idea of portfolio assessments along with teaching them how to cite in-text sources as well as construct a works cited page would help to prepare them for an English composition course. Another factor that students might want to be introduced to at the high school level if not earlier is idea of presenting. Integrating the use of technology (i.e. computers) with the idea of portfolio assessments (i.e. writing as a process, writing as a social act) and presenting their research and writing might help to prepare them for taking on the identity of an "academic" researcher and writer at the college level.

Recommendations

While it is important for English classrooms in the public school system to consider re-evaluating how they teach writing and researching to their students, it is also important for composition instructors to connect, or bridge, not only their students' interests but also their prior writing and researching experiences from high school into college. By doing this, the students and the instructors can see differences between the high school and college level writing and researching as well as work on ways to better connect writing activities and assignments for the benefit of the students. Six important things to consider:

- Accountability – With students, high school teachers, and college instructors

- Integration – With technologies (i.e. computers) and assignments and activities

- Communication – Between high school and colleges, as well as between disciplines

- Professional demonstrations – Professional development for high school and college
  teachers and instructors, dealing with classroom management, assignments, activities, etc.

- Authentic writing activities & assignments – With academic/professional/personal communities (i.e. field researching, ethnographic, & service-learning approaches)

- Teacher & instructor evaluations – Of their performance in the classroom as well as of their activity & assignment sequence and grading methods

While these six factors are important in working with and around school curriculums, it is also important to introduce these concepts to teachers and students early so that they can become comfortable, efficient, and confident when presenting and engaging in writing activities and assignments of this nature.

Appendix A

Semi-formal interview questions that I asked Sarah I., the English composition instructor at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.

1. Name of the professional

2. Title

3. Job description

4. How long has he/she worked with adults?

5. How does he/she characterize adult learners?

6. What does he/she like about working with adult learners?

7. What are the challenges of working with adult learners?

Appendix B

Semi-formal interview questions that I asked Sarah I., the English composition instructor at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.

1. As teacher at the university level, what is your teaching philosophy or theory?

2. Please explain the reasoning behind your research and writing assignments (i.e. portfolios)?

How does it benefit the students?

3. How do you feel you are contributing to your students' success at becoming literate? At the

personal level? At the academic level?

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