

Basic Writing Through the Back Door:**Community-Engaged Courses in the Rush-to- Credit Age**

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This essay describes a linked, community-engaged writing course, “Field Writing: Food Stories,” which was offered as part of an early college program for rural high school students at a regional public university. While demonstrating many of the benefits commonly attributed to public writing and service learning in composition, the course raised important questions about the politics of access and acceleration, and about the role of community-engaged coursework in continuing to protect room in the curriculum for both high school and college writers.

In summer 2013, I was asked to teach two three-week courses for high school students as part of a program on my regional four-year campus promoting rural student access to higher education. Unlike the summer bridge programs for graduating high school seniors offered at many colleges, this program is open to students in tenth through twelfth grades, and unlike Upward Bound and other traditional college prep programs, all classes automatically carry college credit. High school students in the program living on campus are encouraged to take a full load of 12 – 14 quarter credits during each three-week session, and they can enroll in any 100-level course, regardless of grade level and without placement testing or other institutional assessment of their readiness for college work.

Faculty members who taught in the program summers before had expressed concern that students were unevenly prepared for college level courses, that three weeks was too little time to hold even the highest-performing students to the same standards required during the academic year, that students had almost no time outside of class for homework due to the number of credits they were taking and the number of hours they spent each day in class—making it all but impossible to cover the same amount of material or hold them to similar expectations, that student maturity and behavior were sometimes problems, especially in sections in which there

were few college students co-enrolled, and, critically, that the lack of placement testing and blanket expectation of college credit set many students up for failure—an especially undesirable outcome in a program intended at least in part to build confidence and encourage students to return after high school to pursue a college degree. I shared all of these concerns, but hoped that by agreeing to teach in the program, which was administered by another academic unit, I would not only have greater access to conversations about program design in the future but also come to those conversations more directly informed.

Writing faculty had agreed several years before that we would not offer required composition classes—either basic or first-year—as part of the summer program because three weeks simply does not provide enough time to read, discuss, draft, reflect, and revise, let alone work recursively through a series of progressively challenging academic reading and writing assignments, as our modified Stretch program had been designed to do. The limited time for tutoring and conferencing outside of class due to students’ full schedules also lowered their chances of meeting standard composition course outcomes, reduced already by the decision not to placement test. It seemed irresponsible at best to rush tenth and eleventh-grade students through a curriculum for which they may or may not be ready, leaving instructors either to fail underprepared students at the end of three weeks’ time or grant transferable credit that would effectively prevent them from taking first-year writing courses when they did reach college later on.

Concerns like these have become increasingly difficult to voice in this rush-to-credit age, however, in which the rising cost of college and longer average time to degree for students beginning in courses labeled remedial are being used at institutional, state, and national levels to rationalize “accelerating learning” by “eliminating barriers” of all kinds. As Kristine Hansen,

Christine Farris, and contributors to *College Credit for Writing in High School* so well document, dual enrollment and early college programs like this one have gained incredible traction over the last decade, with varying regard for quality, student readiness, faculty support, and disciplinary expertise. On our campus, given the choice between offering high school writers courses for college credit or offering them nothing at all, the challenge became how to design curriculum that would better prepare participating students for college and facilitate access without further shorting them educationally—whether by expecting readiness to address at the college level what many had barely encountered in high school, by compressing and rushing students’ opportunities to learn, or by granting credit for non-equivalent first-year work that would send them even less well prepared into college at the sophomore level.

It seemed to many faculty that what a summer program for high school students should provide was an opportunity for meaningful practice in writing that was engaging, appropriate, and attainable to students at multiple levels, and that not only anticipated but called consciously upon their wide range of knowledge, experiences, literacies, interests, and skills. Moreover, it seemed to me, to facilitate “access,” the program should aim not just to be culturally relevant or culturally explicit (as advocated in different ways, for example, by Bartholomae; Bizzell; Delpit; Adler-Kassner and Harrington; Brooke; and many others), but culturally constitutive, giving students an opportunity to critically engage and actively, discursively co-construct the university and community of which they were becoming a part.

I focus in this article on just one of the two courses I developed in this context, a “project-oriented” public writing class (Mathieu) that I called “Field Writing: Food Stories,” and the questions about basic writing, community engagement, and the politics of access it inevitably raised. Linked with an introductory economics course and supported by a last-minute grant from

the Oregon Agriculture Foundation, “Field Writing: Food Stories” tasked seventeen high school and two college writers with launching an online archive of stories by and about people from across the food system in northeastern Oregon. To use Thomas Deans’ terms, it was a course in “writing about” and “writing for” the community (107-11), while also experimenting with writing *into* the community, even if for just a few weeks. Transcribed as a special topics course, it offered college-level elective credit without promising to substitute for basic writing or first-year composition. By many counts the class was very successful. It clearly illustrated many of the benefits commonly attributed to service-learning in composition, and it was an absolute joy to teach. But as I argue here, it also underscored the importance of fighting to retain a wide range of writing courses for entering college students and continuing to push back against claims that we are providing access while critical opportunities for both high school and college writers to learn and develop are increasingly being cut, compressed, and/or delivered too soon.

The structure of this article reflects in part how conflicted I remain about the class, and in part the multiple tensions at the heart of this special issue of *BWe*, which considers how community and cross-disciplinary collaborations position student writers and the institutions of which both they and we are a part. I start with a detailed description of the “Field Writing” course, illustrating how and why I think this community-engaged model in many ways served this mixed-age group of literacy learners very well. Next, I turn to issues the course surfaced about student development, rhetorical acumen, and time to learn: the reasons I argue nonetheless against offering credit-bearing writing courses to students still in high school. I close with a series of overlapping questions about the role of community-engaged coursework in composition in the current political and educational context, particularly for basic and

students would come to see themselves as makers through this project, creating something new and of value to themselves as well as to an audience beyond the classroom—while at the same time having an immediate and nuanced context within which to explore issues of audience, ethics, representation, arrangement, development, style, and design.

Inspired in part by digital storytelling projects by the Center for Community Change (<http://www.keepingfamieliestogether.net/>), the Association of Independents in Radio (<http://localore.net/>), and Tamera Marko's *Medellin Mi Hogar/ My Home Medellin* (<http://medellinmihogar.blogspot.com/>), I began that spring by approaching the new and outgoing directors of a grassroots community organization on whose board I served about partnering on a similar project related to local food systems, an area in which the organization has done a great deal of work. Though they were undergoing significant staff turnover and were already pulled in multiple directions, they agreed to host the site and connect me to local producers who might be willing to be interviewed, as well as help identify potential guest speakers or area farms students could visit if we were able to secure funding for off-campus trips.

Food was a familiar enough topic that all students would inevitably enter the class with an array of expertise. It was also complex enough to warrant multiple avenues of investigation, and common, current, and controversial enough to provide multiple opportunities for communicating with and getting to know people both on campus and in the community. More importantly, it mattered. As Eileen Schell has argued, “no matter where one teaches, ‘food’ is an important issue to raise as it poses questions of globalization, environmental health, personal and societal health, consumer choices, social justice, and contemporary politics” (43); it also “provides a space for fostering the critical consciousness and critical literacy needed to assess

questions together in GoogleDocs, and they were then assigned to interview someone they knew at home over the weekend.

That first Friday we also took our first off-campus trip, visiting a ranch operated by Tony and Andrea Malmberg approximately fifteen miles from campus (<http://www.beyondorganicbeef.com/>). Tony introduced students to the principles of holistic management that guide decision-making on the ranch, and Nella Parks, who also farms on the property, showed students the garden, goats, chickens, and pigs, explaining how the methods of raising each were informed by this same philosophy. Students took pictures for the archive and asked questions about both economic and environmental aspects, as well as about the personal experiences that had led Tony, a third-generation cattle rancher, to change his approach so dramatically since first starting out.

During the second week of class, we focused more specifically on the genre of profile writing and the ethics of field research, and we walked to the local farmers' market to conduct more interviews. With the permission of the market manager, students interviewed both vendors and customers, their first experience asking complete strangers to participate in the project. While waiting for traffic at the market to pick up, some students also walked the length of the town's main street, requesting permission to interview store owners and customers at a number of downtown shops. Back on campus, we moved to a computer classroom where students began drafting profiles based on the interviews conducted so far. In some cases, students who had interviewed the same person together drafted separate profiles and then compared and merged what they had. In others, they worked together on the same draft from beginning to end, discussing among other things which anecdotes might work well as an opening, which descriptors to put in the nut graf, which direct quotations to use, and how to organize the piece to

write a short evaluation of the class, the finished project, and their own performance. Though the end product is far from perfect by most professional standards, launching “Eastern Oregon Food Stories” (<http://eastoregonfood.wordpress.com/>) felt like a monumental accomplishment that last day of class, with more than seventy profiles collected and written in just three weeks.

Accounting for Time: Age, Experience, and Rhetorical Acumen

From the outset, my hopes for the course, as Mathieu describes them (*Tactics* 54), had been multiple. I was not disappointed, nor, as far as can be told from informal conversations and course evaluations, were most of the students or the community partners with whom we worked. The project lent well to discussions about rhetorical choices and research ethics, as intended, and was accessible to students with a wide range of writing abilities. By and large, individual pieces achieved their general purpose, and the local audience for and about whom students wrote was both engaged and impressed, with many requests to link to the archive from other sites. While students’ levels of investment in the project clearly varied, there was also a much stronger sense of engagement and commitment to drafting, design, and revision overall. Writing about the late nights she spent revising with her roommate during the last week of class, for example, one high school sophomore explained, “We wanted the story to be something the interviewee could be proud of. We were writing about someone else and we wanted them to feel like we represented them well.” Other students reported that the public aspects of the project changed the way they thought about audience and the value of engaging people whose experiences differed from their own. As one of the juniors in high school put it, “I want to know what the rest of the world sees. I want to be able to live different lives through others’ stories.” The sometimes artificial glow of

end-of-term reflections notwithstanding, this was a strikingly different perspective on writing and research than was expressed by many at the start of the class.

Without question, any successes that might be attributed to the class depended fundamentally on the participation of people across campus and community who took the students seriously as writers, lent their technical and professional expertise, and exemplified through the diversity of their experiences and perspectives that “food” was in fact an issue worth investigating and writing publicly about. The field trips and interviews with members of the campus and broader community were instrumental in building and immersing students in a social context for writing and in cultivating the sense of efficacy students expressed as writers and learners at the end: what they had done in the class mattered to people outside the classroom; because it mattered, they had invested more of themselves in the project; and because of this investment, they had succeeded in making something of public importance, which many had not imagined themselves capable or part of before. The small size of the class, the opportunities to work together, and the necessity of doing the majority of drafting and revising during class time were no doubt key as well. These conditions provided writers with a wide range of abilities and experience opportunities to problem solve and share ideas with one another at all stages of the project, and allowed me to provide immediate, individualized feedback as questions arose and drafts evolved.

Far more difficult to evaluate, however, is what it might mean to have done any of this at a college level, or whether providing high school students college credit for this three-week course served them well on any measure besides cost. Read against the “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition,” all students’ writing demonstrated some improvement in rhetorical knowledge, processes, and knowledge of conventions, and all students gained more

experience composing both collaboratively and publicly in electronic environments. Students clearly also gained more experience in critical thinking, as they wrestled with how to represent others' experiences ethically and effectively online, and were better able to articulate how and why they had made particular rhetorical choices than they were at the beginning of the course. But while most students worked hard, made significant gains, and did an excellent job within the context of the project and this particular course, little of the work would have been considered passing if normed against my program's first-year composition course, and less than half of the students still in high school would likely have met outcomes related to focus and development in our basic writing course, even factoring in the difference in genre and the reduced time for revision.

If the question of credit were simply reduced to form, fluency, or some other ostensibly isolable trait, it might be easy enough to draw the line here: a few of the high school students were performing at the end of three weeks at a "level" comparable to first-year students on my campus, and the rest were not. Some should have received college credit based on work submitted and some should not have. Importantly, though, and especially for the students who had just completed their sophomore and junior years of high school, the difference between writing a focused, well-developed profile for the archive and a more superficial one appeared again and again to have as much to do with age and experience as with technical proficiency—in other words, with the distance between many of my teenage students' lives and literacies and those of the adults whose views and experiences they were trying to represent. High school students' write-ups ranged from the very cursory and general to the more nuanced and reflective, with students often struggling in particular with interviewees' moves from individual anecdotes to the philosophical commitments those anecdotes were meant to illustrate, themselves often

based on broader structural and systemic awareness that students had not yet developed. In one instance, students interviewed a university administrator who shared how her mother's inability to afford fresh food when she was growing up had made her particularly sensitive to issues of hunger and food insecurity on campus today. Though the students included several quotations and details from the interview in their profile, their rendering of the larger idea was expressed most completely in the broad closing line, "Powdered eggs and milk might not have been her favorite thing, but it did make a huge impact on her life." No doubt, interviewees of all ages are constrained by their own experiences and level of comfort marshalling others' ideas but the differences in maturity and rhetorical acumen in this case and many others were especially pronounced, raising questions not about the value of the project necessarily, but about granting high school students college credit at this juncture—and suggesting in doing so that they skip first-year coursework and the opportunity to analyze and respond to communicative situations in more nuanced ways when they are a couple of years older as well.

Objections to early college and dual enrollment in composition are commonly made on one or more related grounds: differences in writing contexts between high school and college (see for example Yancey); concerns about the decontextualized, skills-based model of literacy frequently used to rationalize accelerated models (Hansen; Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, and Degener 66); issues of time and the iterative, developmental nature of learning (Joliffe; Taczak and Thelin); and differences in high school and college students' "emotional, social, and cognitive maturity" (National 3). Of these, the roles of time and maturity in students' growth as writers are not only the most difficult to measure but also likely the most compelling reasons not to proceed. As Barbara Schneider attempts to explain in her study of an early college program that enrolled 14-year-old students in first-year composition, many high school-age students simply

lack the “miles on the tires” to perform the depth of analysis expected of their more traditionally college-aged peers (157):

I am . . . aware that chronology, experience, and guidance all affect maturity, that it develops unevenly over time, and that it can be possessed by a fourteen-year-old in the same measure as an eighteen-year-old or a forty-year-old, for that matter. Statistically, however, we might, upon further study, find a distribution of qualitative and quantitative markers that would indicate that younger students cannot fully integrate and retain the higher-order skills they should acquire in these classes, and we would therefore encourage postponement of college courses until an older age. (159-60)

A 2013 policy brief by the National Council of Teachers of English likewise concludes, “Alternate routes to satisfy first-year writing requirements, such as online courses, test-out options, or dual enrollment coursework, can offer students useful preparation for FYW courses. However, such instruction cannot fully replicate the experiences of FYW because high school students’ social and cognitive development is at a different level. . .” (2).

But how to account for these different levels in the classroom, faced with politicians and administrators bent on increasing access by reducing time to degree and lowering costs? What *is* lost when quick-credentialing efforts effectively deny younger and younger students multiple, diverse, iterative opportunities to learn? As I remarked at the beginning, the central challenge in agreeing to teach in the summer program was how to design curriculum that would better prepare participating students for college and facilitate access without further shorting them educationally. This was not a challenge I can claim to have overcome. As difficult as maturity, experience, and rhetorical acumen might be to define or to document, few of the teenage students

in this summer class were “college ready” at the start of the course, let alone ready to skip further first-year coursework by the time it was done. Whatever successes I might attribute to this community-engaged model, and however valuable the experience to the wide range of developing writers in my class, for most, perhaps all of the high school students, the course should simply have been offered as college prep, not college credit. Whether or not granting three credits for non-college-level work in one elective class was likely to set any of them up for future failure, it did effectively short them the opportunity to engage in first-year curriculum at an older age. It also lent credence to the idea that writing can and should be “taken care of” early and quickly, and that students neither require nor benefit significantly from practice and instruction in diverse contexts over time.

Adding to my concerns, it turned out that more than half of the high school students in the class had already earned one or two terms of credit for first-year composition through their high schools, meaning that they would not be required to take any additional first-year writing courses in college, and despite the fact that very few demonstrated the rhetorical awareness, development, critical thinking, organization, or knowledge of conventions that would have been expected by my college’s writing program. The three-week summer class had not included any practice in academic reading, summary, synthesis, or integration of scholarly sources, but based on conversations in class and writing submitted by some of the same students in my summer literature course, it seems fair to speculate that most were fairly inexperienced in those areas as well. By listing my class as a special topics class rather than as basic writing or first-year composition, I had intended to preserve students’ opportunity to take first-year writing classes when they did reach college later on. Instead, this designation ended up creating a little more

space in the curriculum for students who had already earned dual credit for composition in high school and would not otherwise have had another first-year writing course available to take.

In the end, of course, I can speak only of my experience in one class on one campus with one particular group of students—and without having set out to study the relationships between age, access, and college writing curricula that continue to trouble me most. Likely, there were many ways the summer program could have been designed differently to mitigate some of the issues raised here: stronger admissions and placement measures, opportunities for younger and lower-performing students to earn high school rather college credit, restrictions on the number of classes high schoolers could take at once, a higher ratio of college to high school students in each class, a longer term. From this narrow vantage, however, both the successes and limitations of my early college class would seem to argue for more, and more diverse, literacy experiences for incoming students, not less, as current efforts to compress and cost-save are aiming toward. More research is clearly needed, as is more meaningful faculty involvement in early and dual credit discussions at program, institution, and policy levels alike.

Basic Writing through the Back Door

Faced in the meantime with how to provide meaningful access to higher education to more students in spite of ongoing efforts to eliminate the time and types of support that basic writing and college composition provide, I find myself asking different, and arguably dirtier, questions about community-engaged coursework than if there were more support for more and broader literacy experiences at this point. How, for example, might the greater rhetorical currency of service-learning and community engagement be used to protect room in the

back from cost savings to value-added. As ever, preparing students not just to start college but to stay and find meaning in the experience requires invoking both public and academic spaces in which all writers are afforded time to learn, make, connect, and become.

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