Symposium on Collaboration and Interdisciplinarity

Collaboration as the Cornerstone to a Liberal Education

In "Only Connect," an article familiar to many GVSU students and faculty, William Cronon (1998) argues that the mark of a liberal education is that one connects personally with academe, integrating concepts to better understand—and connect with—the world beyond the university.

If the ability to connect is the mark of a well-educated person, then it is important for GVSU to cultivate a curriculum and university environment that encourages collaboration, both to help students make connections among their courses and to connect successfully with their academic and civic communities. In order to successfully model collaboration and deliver a liberal education to the student body, faculty and staff at GVSU must do more to collaborate themselves.

Why Students Need Collaboration to Navigate the University

After spending three years as director of the Fred Meijer Center for Writing, our campus writing center, I've come to see that we can learn much from the way students talk with each other in an academic setting, particularly as they work together to understand the expectations of their professors, the nature of a college education, and their place in the university. We can learn from our students about how to collaborate well, and to surprisingly profound ends.

In a watershed article of writing center scholarship, Kenneth Bruffee (1984) uses the writing center as the key image in describing how collaboration can function in the university to enable students to become active participants in the creation of knowledge as well as prepared to participate in civic activity. He contends "the first steps to learning is to converse better and the sorts of social contexts that foster the sorts of community value" is a "value-laden product" that discourse that discoursing to participate fully in.

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first steps to learning to think better...are learning to converse better and learning to establish and maintain the sorts of social context, the sorts of community life, that foster the sorts of conversation members of the community value" (640). Academic discourse is one value-laden product of the academic community. Mastering that discourse is integral for students as they learn to participate fully in the university community.

What Bruffee's argument boils down to is something with which most faculty at GVSU would agree: a student's ability to succeed in the university is contingent upon the student's ability to write successfully for an academic audience.

But writing their way through the university is a complicated task for students. As they move through the curriculum, they must navigate the various discourses of different disciplines. They must learn to write as scientists, as philosophers, as historians—and as faculty know, the kinds of writing in these fields can, on the surface, appear to be more different than alike.

Bruffee argues that academic discourse is best learned when students collaborate, particularly when they collaborate on writing tasks or when a student writer discusses his or her writing with a peer writing consultant in the campus writing center. Why? Because what happens when a student writes—or when anyone writes for an academic audience, for that matter—is that he or she must have an internal conversation about the topic, examining it from all sides and thinking deeply and critically about what others want to say, all the time trying to discover what he or she wants to say about that very thing. All writers can benefit from supplementing this internal conversation with conversation and feedback from others, and in the case of a student becoming a member of the academic community through his or her writing, such feedback from faculty or peers is integral. Writers, students and faculty alike, need for that "conversation of mankind," as Bruffee discusses it, to be made manifest in some way.

The writing center tutorial is one powerful way in which students can internalize the conversation that occurs whenever one is in the process of integrating or making new knowledge through writing. In a tutorial, a student writer and trained peer writing consultant discuss the topic of the paper, the writer's purpose and
audience, and inevitably, the grammar or mechanics of the piece, as is appropriate to the style of discourse with which the writer is seeking to engage. Their conversation is a pause in the writing process for the student-writer, an opportunity to get outside of himself or herself and immerse in a social, academic context before returning to writing on his or her own. By talking with a peer, the student-writer becomes more practiced at engaging in the kind of conversation necessary to internalize while writing. As Bruffee puts it, "the way [students] talk with each other determines the way they will think and the way they will write" (642). Students become better able to engage both in writing and in conversation at the university by having these opportunities to practice with their peers so that they are ultimately able to connect meaningfully with the academic community. Although the writing center is one model for this kind of peer collaboration, faculty facilitate this same kind of conversation and collaboration any time they assign collaborative projects.

A Few Barriers to Collaboration: Failed Pedagogy, Workload, Organizational Structures, and Disciplinarity

There are, however, many barriers to collaboration, particularly when it comes to faculty working with one another. In some disciplines, such as in the humanities (my academic home), there is some distrust of collaboration as a legitimate professional activity, even as we often encourage students to engage in collaborative projects. Collaboratively authored articles can appear suspicious on one's vita, as they're not the norm.

Professors sometimes distrust the process of collaboration among students, fearing either that working through ideas together on a group project means that individual students aren't displaying enough content knowledge or that a group's process can fail them, and one or two students can be left picking up the pieces—and how should one grade collaborative projects to ensure that individual students earn the grades they deserve?

I've heard faculty express concern that coordinating a syllabus among sections of a course treads on an individual faculty member's academic freedom. And some suggest that collaborative grading of student work is too time consuming, or that it takes less time (hence, isn't fair to faculty)

Admittedly, many of the concerns expressed in the humanities about collaboration are also felt in other fields. Aside from the pedagogical context, these concerns are rooted in the disciplinary culture that shapes the expectations of our students. Consider the policy texts, for example: if a scientific article is collaboratively authored, which implies a collective, hierarchical. Team collaboration is possible, in some fields, to compute in terms of the university's current institutional policies that should provide better guidelines (or collaboration).

Even our organizational structures and disciplines can impede collaboration among colleges and departments. The cultural differences that make up the university's various colleges and departments reflect different daily operating philosophies and professional norms and values. And, of course, people who make up the university's various departments make up the university's culture. And, of course, faculty governance and staff can participate in faculty governance, representation by college and procedures that vary from the administrative to APs. Faculty governance and staff can participate in faculty governance, representation by college and procedures that vary by various campus governance relationships with universities. Present a rosy picture, it's just this fact as the reason why we can make meaningful relationships alone between the
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...the dangers of a culture of discourse with an anti-discipline, in that not believing that courses outside their major are relevant.

Admittedly, many of these are concerns I've heard expressed in the humanities, but even in fields where collaboration is common, problematic issues arise. Aside from the pedagogical issues—how best to foster and fairly evaluate collaboration among students in a course—there are disciplinary conventions and institutional policies that make true collaboration difficult. Consider the politics of authorship of collaborative texts, for example: a "lead author" in a social science or scientific article is assumed to be the "lead researcher," which implies a collaborative process that is unequal or hierarchical. Team teaching is possible—even preferable, in some fields and for some courses—but difficult to compute in terms of faculty workload (although the university's current work on defining faculty workload should provide better avenues toward programmatic collaboration).

Even our organizational scheme at the university can impede collaboration. The university is broken into colleges and departments/programs defined by discipline. The cultural differences between the various units that make up the university are staggering and range from different methodological and pedagogical values to different daily operating procedures, given the curricular and professional needs of the faculty and students in the discipline. And, of course, there are the different groups of people who make up the university, each with their own values and perspectives on a university education, from the administration to faculty to students to APs. Faculty governance rules delineate which faculty and staff can participate in certain deliberations, and the bureaucratic structure of departments/colleges as discrete units as barriers to collaboration and connection for students. Faculty within departments are necessarily focused on their own disciplinary needs, their own place in the university, and therefore students are not consistently shown how the pieces of the university connect. Through both coursework and department-sponsored enrichment activities, students become mired in their major area of study and often acquire tunnel vision, not believing that courses outside their major are relevant.

Ultimately, Spellmeyer argues that writing and the study of discourse is an anti-discipline, in that all subject areas share the common phenomenon of writing as the creation and distribution of knowledge. By writing and studying the ways in which disciplinary knowledge is created and sustained in writing, students can see a common functionality among the subjects they study and often acquire tunnel vision, not believing that courses outside their major are relevant.

Bruffee’s and Spellmeyer’s arguments invite us to view the university itself as a text made up of many value-laden discourses. The university identity exists as a written mission, vision, values statement; its functions are defined by a faculty handbook, administrative handbook, COT and AP contracts, and a student code, all...
written documents; the curriculum realized through syllabi, course catalog copy, and assessment reports—and test questions and answers, essays, and lab reports; the work of faculty is evaluated as a (mostly, if not entirely) written portfolio of our scholarly, pedagogical, and service work; the disciplines themselves are defined by the nature of their discourse and accepted methods of inquiry. If the university exists as discourse, it makes sense to think of how we write it collaboratively or not.

**Finding Ways to Connect**

Of course, there are faculty, staff, and students modeling interesting collaborative strategies already. In the Honors College and Nursing, collaborative teaching happens regularly. In the Writing and Art departments, faculty collaboratively assess students' portfolios. Faculty writing groups meet regularly through the Fred Meijer Center for Writing so faculty can discuss their current writing projects with each other and get much-needed feedback toward revision. The Faculty Teaching and Learning Center regularly offers workshops for faculty wanting to know more about how to get students engaged in collaborative learning, whether face-to-face or online. Freshman orientation is appropriately one programming area in which faculty, staff, and students work productively toward helping students do the practical work of understanding various program requirements and registering for classes, but also preparing to take advantage of what a liberal education has to offer—and even start to understand and articulate what a liberal education is.

So collaboration—meaningful, successful engagement with each other—is possible. However we can, we must do a better job of modeling collaboration for our students, making it such an ingrained part of our culture that students can't help but understand collaboration as a way of realizing a liberal education.

We need to find ways to make connection a possibility for students, and I believe collaboration, as described by Bruffee, is one way. But we also need to find ways for ourselves to collaborate, to deliver a liberal education by modeling it. We too must connect.

**References**


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References

